



Harvest December series

HARVEST DECEMBER

— (Winter) —

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Prologue

I tend to be attracted to all things unreal. On the day I moved from Tokyo to the snowy land of Tagami town, I felt compelled to visit the Tagami shrine after hearing intriguing rumors from the locals. They told me a god resided in the land of Tagami and that she frequently appeared in human form. Of course, I didn't believe them. However...



"You there! As the god of the land of Tagami, I command you to be my husband!"

"Okay." That was me, two months before I started my first day of school.

Here, I would like to insert my favorite quote: Reality is merciless.

The very next day, right after I was introduced to my new class, a beautiful girl dressed in a red kimono caught my attention. She

noticed me watching her, came over with a determined look on her face, and said:



"Masaki Konno, I know this is forward, but will you have me as your girlfriend?"

"Sure." That was me on my first day of school.

Naturally, I had to face the consequences of my actions.



That was me, right after they found out what I had done.

And now...

"Say 'Ah,' Masaki." Here I was, cowering at the sight of a piece of Tamagoyaki pointed towards my mouth. Desperate to find a way out of the situation, my mind frantically searched for the best option I could find. Somehow, the gloss of the lacquered chopsticks looked like the intimidating shine of a gun.

"What's the matter, Masaki? I'm sure I made it just the way you like it." "I'm sure you have, Yuki. But I'd prefer to eat it using a different method, if you please," I insisted.

"I see." The piece of egg retreated from my mouth, just a little. I wondered how she managed to keep such a serious face through all this. Yuki was the only student in school who dressed in a kimono. Although it was against school regulations to dress out of uniform, she was an exception, being the heiress of Towada, a powerful family that controlled most of Tagami's industries. We were the center of

attention in the classroom now, and I felt the sudden urge to escape through the window. In other words, I was truly embarrassed.

"Uh, Yuki, I don't need to be fed like I'm on my deathbed. I'm perfectly capable of feeding myself."

"So that's what you want." Yuki nodded gravely, as if she had found a deep understanding of a difficult problem. "Mouth to mouth, right? You should have said so in the first place. Here, let me..."

"Itadakimasu!" Before she could proceed with her plan, I quickly lunged forward to bite into the Tamagoyaki.

"Is it good?" she asked eagerly.

"...Yes, it was delicious," I replied.

The corners of her mouth lifted ever so slightly. For Yuki, this meant she was extremely pleased. Everyone else seemed to barely notice the change in her mood, but for some reason, I could read her expressions quite easily.

"But Masaki, I must say..." she said, slowly pulling the chopsticks out of my mouth, "that was extremely bad manners. I may love you unconditionally and forgive you for things, but I do believe it is important to show some respect to the food that you eat."

Yuki picked a piece of stewed vegetable from the large two-tiered bento box that took up most of the space on her desk and elegantly took a bite. She didn't seem to mind in the least that the chopsticks had been in my mouth just a second ago.

"Look at that. The way they lick the same pair of chopsticks! I'm sure they do far much more than that in private," I overheard my peers shamelessly whispering behind me. "Obviously. Hey, look at the husband. Is he actually blushing? Or is he getting all hot and bothered? Eww!"

Yes, my face felt hot from their comments. I'm not Yuki's husband, and I didn't lick the chopsticks. And I wasn't the only one blushing either; didn't they notice that Yuki was just as embarrassed as I was?

"It might have been better if you had brought another pair of chopsticks," I suggested amiably.

"That's not an option," she shot me down immediately. "Between you and me, one pair is enough. We can share lovingly while being economically kind to the world's resources by not wasting another pair," she explained.

"It's not kind to my heart or social standing."

She wasn't listening. "Say 'Ah,' Masaki." She lifted a piece of salmon to my mouth, her other hand gracefully placed under it in case it should fall.

"Uh, Yuki..." I muttered, but she cut me off. "I said, say 'Ah.'" She insisted.

There was no way out. Reality is merciless.

"You don't like this?" Her expression darkened. Everyone else would think she was about to explode in anger, but in fact, this was the expression Yuki made when she was about to cry.

The remaining time we had for lunch was diminishing steadily with no regard to my situation. And here I was, still thinking about the best way out of my current plight.

"You must be hungry." Kouhei Touyama tapped me on the shoulder with a pair of wooden chopsticks. "You won't have a decent meal within lunchtime if you have to wait to be fed like that," he said with a friendly smile. His strong accent of the local dialect was something I had grown accustomed to. "Why don't you borrow my pair, if you don't mind?" Kouhei offered.

"You want me to share your chopsticks too? Should I lick the end you used?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You idiot! ... Well, actually, I don't really care even if you did. If that's what you really want," he jokingly said with a slight blush.

"Please stop turning pink when you say that. It makes it look as if you'd like me to," I replied with a grimace.

"Ooh, what's happening here?" Sanae Morino, the girl sitting opposite Kouhei, teased. It was her habit to speak in a slow drawl as if she were sleepy. This was another voice I had grown accustomed to. Despite her relaxed, laid-back manner, her eyes were glinting with mischief.

"Do I see the beginnings of forbidden love? A love triangle within a circle of friends?"

I halted her little fantasy in its tracks. "Stop that! I can tell you're amusing yourself with your imagination."

"Yeah, Sanae," Kouhei chimed in. "Don't say stuff like that out loud. Masaki and I are trying to keep our relationship a secret here; don't complicate things."

You're not helping, Kouhei!

"Oh, is that how it is? Okay, just remember, you have my support!"

Sometimes, my friends give me a headache.

I took Kouhei's pair of chopsticks and, this is the important part, turned it around to use the clean end. Finally, I was able to eat normally and maybe finish a decent portion of the meal before lunchtime ended.

"Hmm. Kouhei, are you trying to sabotage my time with Masaki?" Yuki said with a scowl.

"Come on, Yuki, let the poor man eat the way he wants. Or rather," Kouhei paused for a moment to roll his eyes, "how is it that you guys don't even notice us when we're eating at the same table?"

"Yeah," said Sanae, "we're feeling left out here."

Now that they mentioned it. From the very beginning of lunchtime, we had our desks moved to face each other so the four of us could eat together.

"They say love is blind, but both of you take it to the next level. I feel like I might get pregnant just sitting next to you two sometimes." Sanae could be quite dynamic with her expressions sometimes.

"Yeah, me too," Kouhei added.

"I suppose my method isn't too efficient." Yuki sighed. For a split second, she looked disappointed, but then she didn't complain any further and carried on with her meal, allowing me to feed myself. I glanced at Kouhei to express my thanks. He just responded with a crooked smile.

"I have been meaning to ask, but..." Yuki said after the bento box was half-emptied, "you know how I adore children, right?"

"Yes," I replied as I reached for a piece of fried chicken, "and you always carry sweets in your purse to give out to any kids that pass your way."

"I didn't know that. I'm surprised you noticed," Kouhei muttered.

"Of course he pays attention; it's called love," Sanae responded.

"It's called L-O-V-E!" the class murmured in chorus, but I ignored them. Mmm! The fried chicken was really good.

"So, we've been dating for about two months already," Yuki continued. I looked up at the clock on the wall; lunchtime was almost

over.

"What are you trying to say, Yuki?" Kouhei questioned. "Two months is a bit weird for some kind of anniversary."

"Yeah." Sanae nodded, just as confused as Kouhei was.

Yuki reached for a piece of braised potato. "I was just trying to say I want a yayako with Masaki."

"Bffffff!!!" Half of my classmates choked on their food.

"Grgggg!!" "Gluggg!" The other half choked on their drinks. It took a few minutes for the class to calm down. Only Yuki seemed unfazed.

"Yayako," I repeated the unfamiliar word.

"Yes. I thought it was about time. Also, I have another question..." But before she could ask, the classroom door flew open with a bang.

"Hold on a minute!" The intruder's soft brown curls swayed wildly around her face. "Did I hear someone say something about making a yayako!? I won't allow anything of this sort to happen on the sacred grounds of our school!" Mizuho Touyama's nostrils flared. I could almost see steam coming out of them. Kouhei tried to calm her down.

"Hey, Mizuho..." Kouhei muttered.

"You shut up!"

"Okay." What a valiant effort. It was obvious who held more power between the siblings. I turned to face her directly.

"Touyama," I said calmly, trying to diffuse the tension.

"What do you have to say, Masaki-san?" she said with a glare.

"It's winter now," I said plainly.

"So?" she said, looking at me as though I kicked her dog.

"It's really cold. Shut the door."

"Huh?" I pointed towards the entrance, where a few of my classmates sat nearby with chattering teeth.

"Ah, right..." Looking sheepish, Mizuho walked toward the door and gently closed it. Being quick to admit her fault was one of the qualities people admired about Mizuho, and perhaps why, despite being a junior in grade one, she was popular enough to be elected Head of the Student Council.

"Achoo!!" She sneezed as she sat at our desks.

"I'm still not appeased," Mizuho grumbled as she rocked back and forth on the chair she was sitting on. Squeak, bump. Squeak, bump. It was a habit of hers when she was irritated about something. The chair clattered and groaned as she shifted her weight. The five of us made our regular party. It wasn't often that a junior would visit a senior's classroom, but Mizuho was an exception, being Kouhei's little sister. Squeak, bump. The chair continued to make straining noises.

"What are you unhappy about now?" I finally asked.

"You should know!" Unable to keep balance with her sudden movement, the chair fell over with a loud bang.

"OW!!" Mizuho fell back with her feet in the air, hitting her head hard on the floor. It took a few minutes to stop her howling, with Yuki patting her head.

"How can you act as if nothing happened!" Mizuho sobbed. She made it sound like I was to blame.

"Can I ask you something?" I said, still confused by all the chaos. Mizuho furrowed her brow.

"I hate the fact that you're answering a question with a question, but... okay." She graciously gave her permission, so I asked.

"What's a yayako?" ...Dead silence. Feeling uncomfortable, I jogged my memory again. Sifting through my vocabulary, I was pretty sure I'd never heard that term in the two months since I moved here.

"You mean you don't know?" Mizuho asked, peeking up from beneath her lashes.

"No..." I said, her expression turning angry.

"DESTROY HIM!!!"

"Oh, calm down, Mizuho-chan, it's not a big deal." Sanae's slow, relaxed drawl didn't placate Mizuho at all.

"You made me make a fool out of myself! I made a big entrance for you! Here I am shouting about making yayakos, and you say you didn't know? I'm never getting married ever, because of YOU!" She probably didn't realize she was making a fool out of herself right now.

In situations like this, I'm always calm. Why? Because if I don't understand what the problem is, I can't register the reality of it. I feel detached from it all. It's like watching a fire from afar.

"Mizuho," Kouhei muttered, "with a temper like that, no man would be brave enough to take you as his wife anyway."

"Shut up!!" She punched Kouhei's jaw, putting him down with the precision and speed of a boxing champion. With the proper training, I'd imagine she could take on the world.

"Bbrrrrrrriiiinnngg" The first bell rang.

"Oh, lunchtime's over. Hey, Yuki," maybe she can provide some clarity.

"Hmm?" Yuki was packing away her bento box, oblivious to our conversation the whole time. She looked at me with her large, questioning eyes.

"What's a yayako?" I repeated the question that nobody answered.

"It means baby in our dialect." - And reality caught up with me. A baby. A baby? She's asking for a baby?

"...Y-Y-You want to make a baby?" I was pretty sure my voice was trembling.

"Yes," she said unreasonably calmly.

"W-W-When?" I asked, my mind flaying apart.

"Right now, right here if you want to." WHAT?!?!?!?

"Hot as hell!" Kouhei said, not helping a damn thing.

"No, it's winter now, and it's frickin' cold!" Yuki continued, "I think we should have at least ten for starters."

"What do you mean, for star-WAIT, YOU WANT TEN?!?!?" I might actually be going insane.

"Oh, Masaki-kun is so fun to tease." Poke him a little, and his cool demeanor starts crumbling, and his comebacks get a little off-point too.

"Tea, anyone?" Sanae said as she poured a cup from her vacuum bottle and passed it to Yuki.

"I have a question too," Yuki said after taking a sip. I calmed myself down and took a deep breath.

"What is it?" I asked.

Yuki gently set her cup down and asked, "How do you make a yayako?"

I looked down, shook my head, and looked up to the ceiling. After sucking in as much air as I could into my lungs, I yelled:

"MOM, DAD, I WANT TO GO BACK TO TOKYO RIGHT NOW!!!!!!"

The second bell rang amidst Kouhei and Sanae's laughter, and Mizuho was looking annoyed until the teacher came in.

Discussion; Boy's/Girl's Side

Boy's side

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I kept walking whilst staring at my feet. It was my habit when deep in thought. My footsteps left crisp, white imprints on the thick layer of snow, a stark contrast to the sullied streets of the city. "A blizzard might come by nightfall," Kouhei commented as he looked up at the grey sky. And then, silence again. Only the crunching sound of our footsteps reached our ears. As soon as school ended, Mizuho said that she, Sanae, and Yuki would discuss the situation together. "Girls only!" she insisted. I immersed myself in my thoughts again. Thinking and imagining are the same thing. You process what is in your reality now, then repeatedly imagine all sorts of different outcomes from the actions you consider taking. "I still can't decide," I finally said after half an hour of contemplation.

"What about?" Kouhei asked.

"The cabbage patch," I answered.

"Huh?" Kouhei said with confusion.

"The cabbage patch or the stork. How do I explain the mechanics of making babies to Yuki? What's the best choice?" I was trying to give Yuki a satisfying answer without having to meet her demands.

Kouhei sighed and said, "You can't be serious; that's a worse explanation than the textbooks we get in biology."

"Those were the best options I could think of," I said with exasperation.

"I suppose it could be possible to trick the princess of Towada into believing them. She's unbelievably innocent in matters like that." Kouhei spoke familiarly about Yuki, because he had known her since childhood. "She was brought up so strictly, she'd never even seen a TV set until she was in secondary school."

I know she can be naive; otherwise, she wouldn't have requested a baby in public.

"She's pretty straightforward with her feelings too." he added.

"That's an understatement; she asked me out on my first day of school!"

"Well, why don't you just give in?" Kouhei stopped and grabbed my shoulders. "Explain it to her practically, not informatively! Take some action! GET some action! And then tell me all about it when it's over!"

"I shouldn't have confided in you in the first place." I replied with a scowl. I had thought Kouhei would take me seriously and give me some good advice, but perhaps my expectations were too high. I sighed and quickly started to walk away. I just wanted to duck under a warm blanket and mope now.

"Wait up," Kouhei said empathetically. Noticing the change in the tone of his voice, I turned around. "Why don't you ask for the opinion of our resident god?" he nodded towards a small yashiro on the side of the road.

"Masaki!" A voice rang out with the howl of a wolf. The doors of the yashiro flew open as something burst out of it in a white blur. The speed of it heading straight towards me exceeded the speed of my reflexes. Without being able to dodge...

"OOF!!" My body flew horizontally from the impact. 'Oh wow, humans can fly.' Just as I was thinking that... Collision.

"Love hurts?" Kouhei commented offhandedly.

"Uuuugh..." I groaned as I tried to get up. I had hit a tree. My head was spinning from the impact.



"You wimp! And you consider yourself the husband of a god?" Shiro, god of the land of Tagami, asked as I began to focus.

"I told you before, you've got to stop bowling me over like that..." I scolded.

"I can't be bothered to remember unimportant promises. Consider it your punishment for making a god feel this excited to see a mortal again," she said with a smirk. As I've said before, I tend to be attracted to all things unreal. The low growl of a wolf penetrated the air. White breath escaped through its yellow teeth, obscuring for a moment the sight of the small girl riding on its back.

"Come on, stand up now. Your friend is getting worried." Shiro said with a wild, feral smile. She behaved like someone used to imposing

on others and having her way. "You're visiting this boy's house, aren't you? I'll make my way there first. See you later." She jumped off the wolf's back and ran towards the yashiro she had just come out of. "Don't keep me waiting!"

And that was it. Ducking under the small doors, she disappeared.

"By now you would think she would remember my name," Kouhei grumbled. But I wasn't listening. I was entranced by the sight of her, still looking for traces of her, the image of her running away printed on my mind. The vision of her, the legends about her, all got mixed up and erased everything real about her.

"You are completely hopeless," Kouhei sighed.

"Gruff," the wolf barked, nodding in agreement.

"I still find it hard to believe that's supposed to be the god that protects us," Kouhei added.

"Gruff." The wolf nodded again. He understood our language. Giving me a warm, wet lick on the cheek...

"Apologies on behalf of my master," he spoke directly into my mind. *"I really cannot help the way she behaves."*

"I know that, Shiromaru," I murmured without looking at him. My mind was still fuzzy.

"Come on, let's hurry. You never know what she'll get up to if we're late," Kouhei said, wiping the snow off my shoulder.

"I agree," Shiromaru said, giving me another lick.

Our goddess was notorious. I stood up with shaky legs. Shiromaru gestured to his back with a swing of his nose: "Get on."

I nodded, but I didn't move.

"You alright?" Kouhei asked.

"I'm fine," I lied. I was still feeling the aftermath of the impact. I gazed at the wolf's white back. She was there, just a few moments ago. Shiro-sama had sat there.

Shiro-sama...

Girl's side

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"Shiro-sama's to blame for everything!!" Mizuho yelled, flailing her arms about. Yuki watched as Mizuho's small footsteps peppered the snow in wild, erratic patterns. The three girls wandered down a less traveled road, veering from their usual route home.

"She has to be the devil! Fidiot-ass-munching-pud-whacker!" Mizuho's voice was filled with rage as she spat out her words.

"Oh, blasphemy, Mizuho," said Sanae. "Stop it, or you'll curse us all. Nanmandabu, nanmandabu..."

"What does 'fidiot' mean?" Yuki interjected, "You know I'm not very good at slang."

"You're all missing the point!" Mizuho said in anger, "And nanmandabu is a Buddhist chant, not Shinto like the so-called god that's causing Yuki trouble!"

Yuki scowled. "Don't say things about her like that; it's disrespectful."

"Yeah? But because of her, Masaki-san's gone all gaga," Mizuho replied.

Yuki's expression became hostile. "Do you think I would make a successful god-slayer?" Mizuho recoiled in shock, her eyes widening as she took a step back.

"Whoa! Don't suddenly go murderous like that!"

Yuki shined the blade of her naginata and said, "Kubikirimaru will make sure she never sees the light of day again if she so much as lays a finger on Masaki..."

"Okay, now you're scaring me!" Mizuho said, hiding behind Sanae.

"If we're really going to finish her off, we've got to plan carefully!" Sanae said jokingly, "No one must know who did it. How exciting! The perfect murder mystery."

"What!? Are you for real??" Mizuho said in shock.

"We'll take her down with no regrets." Sanae continued, "No guilt, no remorse; that's the way to go. We shall triumph and feel good about ourselves once it's over!"

"Looks like it's going to be a cold-blooded night," Yuki said with a dark smirk.

"You all, stop going off-topic like that!" yelled Mizuho. "No bloodshed! No mystery!"

Yuki looked up at the heavy sky, gathering her haori around her shoulders. It was getting dark. "What's the matter, Mizuho? You look upset."

Mizuho just sighed. "Never mind..." She said as she walked off with her shoulders slumped. Yuki and Sanae just shrugged at each other. The snow was reported to be excessive this year, even for Tagami. On their way, they met several people from the town council spreading melting agents onto the roads. Whenever Yuki nodded in greeting, they would bow deeply.

"FAME!" Sanae exclaimed.

"They aren't bowing to me," Yuki said. "They are bowing to Towada."

"But you'll inherit everything one day. So it's the same thing, right?" Mizuho said, back in a good mood again.

"No. I won't be taking over Towada. Masaki will be, as my husband," Yuki said with determination.

"Oh, you've got his future planned out for him already, have you?" Sanae chimed.

"Am I wrong?" Yuki asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Just typical!" Sanae and Mizuho exclaimed in unison.

Yuki frowned. "Somehow I have a feeling that wasn't a compliment."

"Not really," they said, once again in unison.

"Humph." Yuki didn't seem too satisfied with their chirping but didn't pursue the matter further.

"We're here, Tadaima!" I'm home! Sanae said as she ducked under the noren painted with the letters, Sanae's. The small Japanese eatery, with its warm lighting and cozy atmosphere, was named after her. As she pulled the wooden sliding doors open, the inviting scent of Japanese wine and warm stew wafted out to greet their noses.

"Welcome home." Sanae's mom, Yumi, looked up. She was making preparations for the evening.

"Can we sit here, Mom?" Sanae asked with a smile.

"How could I refuse when we have the daughter of Towada here as our guest?" she teased.

When she smiled like that, it was obvious where Sanae got her looks from. Sanae and Mizuho sat down at their usual spot at the counter table. But Yuki stood still, facing the back of the shop.

"You all," she called out towards a group of men taking up the floor seats.

"Young Miss!" They jumped visibly.

"I believe working hours aren't over yet?" Yuki questioned.

"I, um... this is..." The young man sitting closest to the front attempted to make an excuse but failed miserably. All of the men at the table worked for Towada. In other words, their livelihood depended on the Towada family.

"All of you are gathered here even before the sun has set, imposing on Yumi-san's kindness to let you in despite the fact it's before the evening opening hours. Do you have anything to say about that?" Yuki scolded. They all fell silent, fidgeting uncomfortably in their seats. It wasn't unusual for men twice the size of Yuki to cower under her glare.

"Scary." Sanae muttered, happy she wasn't on the receiving end of Yuki's wrath. "There is yet to be a man who can defy a Towada woman and live to tell the tale. Oh, thanks!" Mizuho said as she accepted a small dish of braised vegetables from over the counter.

"However," Yuki said as her expression softened, "I suppose I'm no better, since what I've accused you of myself. As partners in crime, shall we all agree to keep this a secret?" The men slowly smiled, then nodded.

Yuki beckoned to Yumi, "Yumi-san, please put the bill for this table on me."

Yumi nodded like a child. "Um, okay."

Sanae frowned slightly. "Mom, you're behaving like Yuki's the adult here."

"Please enjoy your evening." Yuki bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Young Miss!" "To the princess of Towada!"

The men cheered and lifted their glasses, the atmosphere suddenly warm again.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Yuki returned and took her seat beside Sanae.

"That was impressive," Mizuho remarked.

"Mother has always told me to loosen the leash a little. And also, to loosen their heads," Yuki said.

"I don't think Masaki-kun would have been able to handle that situation the way Yuki did," Mizuho said with a chuckle. "I think we know who's going to be wearing the pants in the relationship. Oh, maybe Yuki likes guys that can be controlled?" Sanae muttered.

"What are you two whispering about?" Yuki groaned.

"Nothing. Oh, look! Here's our food." Sanae stood up and laid out the dishes with great efficiency. The steaming hot plates looked appetizing and smelled delicious.

"Let's dig in. We'll talk later. First, we eat!" Sanae declared, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Boy's side

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"Want more tea?" Kouhei offered.

"If we were at Sanae's right now, I'm sure I'd be the topic of gossip for the evening. In that way, I'm glad we're here." I sighed.

"You guys! Look, the program's getting into the juicy bits now," exclaimed Shiro, her eyes glued to the TV. We were sitting in Kouhei's room, picking on snacks and having hot tea.

"Isn't it pathetic that two guys are stuck here instead of partying outside with girls?" Kouhei asked.

"Look! You two!! Ooooh, that's steamy..." Shiro remarked, completely ignoring the conversation. Both Kouhei and I were drinking as much hot tea as we could to warm our bodies. No matter how much we drank, the tea quickly turned cold, leaving us shivering on the floor of Kouhei's messy room.

"Come on, drink up, or you'll die of the cold!" Kouhei insisted.

"Why don't you put the heater on?" I questioned. The thermometer near Kouhei's desk read just under zero degrees.



"No! I won't allow it!" A protesting growl came from behind Kouhei, cutting through the high-pitched, lewd voices coming out of the TV set. The god of Tagami had acquired a taste for the raunchy, melodramatic soap opera that aired during this time. The action going on in the show was giving us an education of a different sort, although we tried not to look at the screen because, well, frankly, it was awkward.

"I don't like it when it's warm," Shiro said, her eyes not leaving the screen. She was hugging a huge bucket of ice cream, shoveling large spoonfuls into her mouth. Her cheeks inflated like a chipmunk from the effort.

"You're eating ice cream?" I asked.

"Yes, and I want more. Be a good mortal and bring me offerings," she demanded. I looked at Kouhei and sighed.

"Shiro-sama, would you melt if it got too warm?"

She scowled, "I'm not a Yuki-Onna. So no, I won't die even if it were hot." She retorted, glancing at us. "However, because you mortals believe I am a god from snowy lands, I'm more comfortable in this element. I hate it when it's warm."

I was puzzled by her explanation. "You mean you're affected by our beliefs?"

"Now I am." She gave a short reply, then she turned back to the TV, engrossed.

I still didn't understand. "Now? Was it different in the past?" I asked, but she wasn't listening.

"Tell me, mortal. This man has a lover, but he can't be satisfied with just one. He goes off getting into relationships with all sorts of women and has gotten himself into trouble because of it. Are all men of your species like this?"

Well, that's awkward. I didn't have an answer, so I looked away from her. On the TV screen, a man was standing by the edge of a cliff with several women slowly advancing on him.

"I suppose it has something to do with our primal instincts, having the need to breed," Kouhei reasoned.

"Oh, Kouhei, that was really convincing coming from you." Shiro sneered, "Please don't suddenly decide to remember my name while we're on this topic." Kouhei pleaded, "Or rather, I'll have you know I prefer a monogamous relationship, and I'm pretty normal when it comes to my choice in women. It's Masaki here that has peculiar tastes."

"Really? Tell me more." Shiro asked curiously. I really just have the best of friends, don't I?

"He's got these photogravure books of girls in kimonos. He gets his kicks from girls that show no skin. Now I say that's a guy on a whole new level!" Kouhei explained. I'll choose to take that as a compliment.

"That's... kinda sick actually. Shows he has a perverted imagination." Shiro remarked, "However, I am a god, so I shall show my benevolence. Don't worry, Masaki, I'm not going to treat you any different."

"You are too kind." I sighed.

Shiro continued, "So, do you have the urge to have several lovers too, Masaki?" but I pretended not to hear her. Kouhei was looking smug. He must be feeling pretty pleased with himself for putting me in an awkward situation. We were finally getting warm from all that tea. The sound of a man screaming and several women shouting angrily flowed continuously from the TV set. Shiro kept commenting on each scene, throwing difficult questions about human nature at us now and then. It was strangely exhausting, and-

"She's going to drive me mad." Kouhei muttered. My sentiments exactly.

"Oh look, it says the next show is named 'The Kimono Beauty Mysteries: Murder in the Hot Springs.' Sounds like something right up your alley, Masaki!" I looked over to the TV; the girl in the trailer of the TV drama smiled and waved at the audience.

"She looks a lot like Yuki." I commented.

"Oi, Yuki's a lot prettier. And way younger!" Kouhei laughed.

"It makes me uncomfortable." I sighed. "I don't feel like I deserve to be smiled at like that; it makes me feel guilty."

"You mean..." Kouhei trailed off. I nodded. He was referring to the reason why there was a space between me and Yuki. The reason why I couldn't take a step further in our relationship. The reason why I couldn't give her what she wanted.

"Because I don't love Yuki."

Girl's side

=====

"Masaki doesn't love me," Yuki mumbled in a small voice after a long stretch of silence. "I know it." It was a vulnerable admission, but Yuki's expression didn't change one bit.

"Are you listening?" she questioned.

"Yeah, I am..." Mizuho reassured her. Although Yuki gave the impression of being a steely girl capable beyond her years, Mizuho knew that under that iron facade, Yuki had a heart softer than most. The eatery was getting busy, and Sanae was helping out by waiting tables as she usually did. Her funny exclamations of "Hawah!" or "Uwa!" were heard every now and then, but she didn't look as if she was overwhelmed by the amount of customers at all.

"But how can you stand going out with somebody that doesn't love you?" Mizuho questioned.

"The problem is, I love him no matter what," Yuki insisted.

"Love. That's so YOU." Mizuho groaned, "But you're just going to hurt yourself if it continues to go on like this."

"What should I do?" Yuki asked, covering her face with her hands. A few locks of her hair escaped from her fingers, running down the backs of her hands like black silk.

"Shame on you, Mizuho, you've made her cry!" Sanae came over, still wearing her navy apron. It appeared she had finished her work.

"It's not me that made her cry; it's Masaki-san! That two-timing cheater! You should use Kubikirimaru on him!" Mizuho suggested.

"Yeah, give it to him! If he can't get it mentally, let him know physically!" Sanae cheered.

Yuki sat up straight and sighed. She had a small pout on her lips as she stared at the menu on the counter.

"But whatever punishment or forgiveness I give won't change a thing."

"Unless he changes how he feels?" Mizuho said with a sigh.

Yuki continued, "I'm making all the effort, but nothing gets through. Why?"

Boy's side

=====

"It was my way of protecting myself." Shiro had enough TV for the day and was fast asleep hugging the empty ice cream bucket to her chest.

"When I accepted her," I began, looking towards Shiro, "I felt like I needed a way to balance things out."

"And you decided to date Yuki just for that reason?" Kouhei questioned.

"I like things that are unreal," I answered. "Yuki was unreal too."

"I suppose she can be. Love at first sight..." Kouhei said, unconvinced. He openly showed annoyance on his face. "So what were you trying to 'balance out,' as you say? Are you putting a god and a human on a seesaw?" he asked jokingly.

"I don't even know myself, but this situation feels safe for me," I admitted.

"Are you in love with Shiro?" Kouhei asked.

"No, I'm not in love with her either," I answered. Kouhei didn't understand my logic; quite honestly, I don't either. I would often think about it, go in circles, and come back to the same place again. I didn't love them; I didn't hate them. But I liked having a connection with them. What was I doing? What did I even want? What...

"Hey," Kouhei gave me a thumbs up. "Don't think too much. I say, make yourself love Yuki. Get married to her, have kids, and by the

time you know it, you won't even have time to worry about stuff like this."

I imagined the future Kouhei suggested. Having kids with Yuki? My face burned at the thought.

"Hey, why are you blushing like that?" Kouhei teased smugly.
"Anyway, that's my piece of advice."

"You mean I should disrupt the balance?" I asked.

"What are you talking about? You don't even know what that 'balance' is," he responded bluntly.

"But I haven't found any reason to decide on either of them," I argued.

Kouhei scowled, "You need a reason?"

Girl's side

=====

"Anything could be the reason," Sanae said. "Masaki-kun might look like the calm type, but he isn't. Not really. Poke him a little, and the cool exterior starts to crack. Just push him over and keep a tight leash on him!" she explained.

"Yeah, just DO it," Mizuho exclaimed through a mouthful of stewed pork.

"But I've already tried all that I can, and there's no change whatsoever," Yuki complained.

"We're just saying, get your eggs fertilized and you'll be alright," Sanae said bluntly.

"Uh, Sanae, that's... oh, forget it," Mizuho said, wrinkling her nose. It was Sanae after all.

"Are you saying I should use physical force?" Yuki asked.

"Don't go head-butting with him. Lure him into a trap and cut off all his escape routes," Mizuho explained.

"We'll help," Sanae insisted.

"We could use my big brother too," Mizuho added. The terrors of having a tyrant for a sister.

"You remind me of Mashiro," Yumi chimed in. All three girls looked up at her.

"What about my mother?" Yuki asked. Yumi was an old friend of Yuki's mother from a young age.

"You're both so similar; I'm confident things will work out just fine."
Yumi smiled to herself and walked off to chat with the other customers.

"What was that about?" Yuki asked, looking confused.

"Everything will be fine," Sanae reassured.

"Leave it to us!" Mizuho chimed in.

"Thank you." Yuki bowed her head graciously. "Let's go home." It was already dark.

Outside the Golden Bough

I left Kouhei dozing in his room after a quick goodbye and walked out into the biting cold. It was dark by now, and my feet left deep holes in the thick snow, making crunching noises with each step. "Just my luck," I muttered as I looked up to the sky. Just as Kouhei had predicted, a blizzard had begun. The melting agents that had been spread during the afternoon had lost all their effect by now, and my legs got caught in the drifts where in some areas, snow stacked up to my shins.

I walked, using the streetlights as my guide. After walking for about ten minutes, I came out to an open area of frozen rice paddies. If I tripped and fell here and had the misfortune of losing consciousness, I was pretty sure I would die of the cold. Not ready to die yet, I quickly picked up my pace.

"Wait up, you disrespectful mortal!" I heard from behind. "Oof!" I fell face down from being tackled by the waist.

Thanks to the snow, there was no pain. I rolled over so I could breathe, my arms and legs splayed out. I felt the cold slowly spread through my body. My breath fogged the air. Through the light of the street lamps, it was hard to tell whether the skies were colored black or gray. Only the snow made a clear statement of being white.

"Get up, slowpoke!" Shiro shouted. "You'll die if you don't move." Shiromaru nudged me on the cheek with his nose.

"I'll die if I don't move?" I muttered in a daze.

"Yup, but you know I won't let you," Shiro said with a smile.

I stood up, almost as if I were in a trance. I wasn't sure if she put magic on me, or if I was moving out of my own will, enchanted by

her smile, just to get closer.

"Why didn't you wait for me to wake up?" she whined. It appeared I had angered a god. "You have no idea how sad a woman feels when she wakes up alone."

"Kouhei was there," I argued.

"He doesn't count," she said. Poor Kouhei.

I glanced at the small yashiro sitting by the road. "But you can get home easily as long as you have a yashiro or an altar, can't you?" I suddenly realized we were in the exact same spot where Shiro bowled me over a few hours ago. The tree I had been knocked into was now thickly draped in snow. This place was right in the middle between Kouhei's house and mine.

"You think those yashiro are just for me to jump in and out of, don't you?" Shiro asked angrily. "They have other purposes, you know."

"But I'm right, aren't I?" I asked. The girl in front of me rode a wolf, loved eating ice cream, and watched soap operas. She made it easy to forget that she is, in fact, the god of these lands.

"You're being a tease," she said as she shifted her body forward on Shiromaru's back. "You know that's not what I mean." She made room behind her, inviting me to sit. I climbed on. The wolf started to run.

"What I want is to be with you," Shiro said softly. Shiromaru ran at a comfortable pace, occasionally jumping over thick patches of snow.

"Whoa," jolted, I grabbed hold of Shiro's waist to steady myself. "If you don't mind, I'll just hang on to you," I told Shiro.

"I don't even know if you're doing this on purpose," she said, placing a hand on top of mine. "You always give me what I want at the least expected moments."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean when you hug me like that..." She seemed at a loss for words.

I pulled her towards me and hugged her tighter. Pressing my chest to her back, I finally felt secure in my seat.

"Hold me closer," Shiro said. I did as she said. She was maneuvering the wolf with one hand grasping the ruff of his neck.

"Masaki, you're big," Shiro commented.

"Really!?" I asked, surprised by the sudden compliment.

"W-why do you look so happy about that?" She turned toward me, and I saw her cheeks were flushed.

"Because size is a big deal for guys!" I responded.

"I suppose that's understandable," Shiro said. "The taller ones are generally stronger."

"The taller ones?" I asked.

"Yes. You're tall enough to cradle me like this," Shiro answered.

"Oh. You were talking about my height. Right." My ego deflated, and my shoulders slumped.

"What are you disappointed about? Ooh, I see." She snickered, her lips curving into a nasty smile. I didn't like that look.

"Nooooooooooooooooo-!!!!" I shouted, "I've been taken advantage of." If I weren't holding onto Shiro, I would be sobbing into my hands.

"You molested me!" I exclaimed.

"What? I just thought you needed a hand." Shiro joked.

"Why are you acting as if that was the most natural thing to do!?" I scolded.

"Oh, come on, everything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right?" She chuckled.

"That doesn't justify what you did at all!" I had more that I wanted to say, but I didn't. It wasn't really something I wanted to discuss in depth anyway. Satisfied after having her fun, Shiro kept quiet. We rode on Shiromaru in silence for a while.

"You have a problem," Shiro said, breaking the silence.

"What problem?" I asked, keeping my guard up.

"Relax, I'm not going to toy with you again," Shiro assured.

From the look on her face, I wasn't convinced. But then, her expression tightened. "You were talking about that stone-faced girl." She was talking about Yuki. I nodded.

"I want answers," she demanded. It probably didn't occur to her that I had the option of not answering at all, but nevertheless.

"She said she wants a baby," I said.

"Hrrm?" Unable to suppress her surprise, Shiro made a funny noise in her throat.

"It's Yuki. I guess I should have seen that coming," I responded.

"Explain," she said plainly.

"There's nothing more to say about it. And Kouhei was telling me off," I said, trying to end the conversation.

"You're going to make a baby?" Shiro asked with a giggle.

"Of course not." My answer was quick.

"Why not? I thought all men instinctively want as many offspring as possible," Shiro questioned.

"Do I seem that desperate to you?" I questioned.

"Not really. Besides, there's nothing much that's manly about you." She joked at my expense.

"I find that offensive." I crossed my arms, growing tired of these blows to my pride.

"Or, perhaps you have suffered some trauma in the past regarding women?" Shiro asked... but I didn't say anything.

"You could try having a child with me, if you like." I couldn't see her expression when she said that because she was facing away from me.

"You can't be serious," I said.

"I'd do a better job than her," Shiro insisted.

"You sound so experienced," I commented.

"If having one man at one hundred-year intervals counts as experience, then yes." She laughed.

"Leave us." She tapped the wolf on its neck. Shiromaru shook his body once, throwing us up in the air, and ran off into the dark.

"Careful!" Shiro yelled. We were suspended mid-air for a moment before we landed on the ground safely.

"Let me go," she said, glowering at me in my arms, "You're holding me like a baby."

I let her go.

"You make a terrible prince. You don't even know how to carry a girl properly," she said, landing gracefully on the snow.



"I wanted some privacy," she muttered. I looked toward the direction Shiromaru ran off. Beyond the white curtain of snow, I could see the silhouette of Ookami mountain in the background. The snow beat down diagonally from the strong wind. Ookami, meaning the land where many gods lived, with wolves as their loyal servants. Or, rather, a land where a god still lives with a wolf by her side. She noticed me staring off into the distance.

"What's the matter?"

"What is Shiromaru?" I asked curiously.

"He's not my servant, if that's what you're asking," she answered.

"You mean he isn't under your command?" I was surprised, to say the least.

"Shiromaru is made from a part of me," she continued, looking amused at my open surprise.

"But, why?" I asked, still wanting more answers.

"I assume that was not just one question," she grumbled. I kept quiet, waiting for an answer. "I didn't want a servant," Shiro began to explain. "I wanted a complete individual, a companion. For the last three hundred years, Shiromaru has lived independently without any need of my powers."

"But, for what reason?" I asked. Why would a god purposely divide herself when that could mean losing a part of her powers? I had imagined being flawless, being whole, would be essential to being a god.

"I was lonely," she answered softly.

I wasn't expecting that answer, and I think Shiro noticed my surprise.

"Is that so hard to believe?" She wasn't smiling anymore. She was asking me with the eyes of a god but the words of a girl. The simple question hit me hard.

"To be honest, I'm a little disappointed," I answered. She was a god, and yet she purposely let go of a part of herself. I didn't like the fact she had chosen to mar her perfection. That first day when I met her on these lands... She seemed so fearless that she was overwhelming. And now I didn't see her like that anymore.

"You humans would describe me as being immortal," she continued. "I suppose that's what's to be expected of a god, but it's not something certain. It all depends."

"Depends on what?" I asked.

"I am the mountains. I am the earth, the soil. As long as part of that remains, I stay alive." Shiro's explanation was similar to the old Shinto belief that all things have spirits or gods within them. I wanted to know more about this, so I asked her to continue.

"It is possible for humans to kill me now, I suppose. With the technology you have nowadays," she lamented.

"You mean, if we use something like a nuclear bomb," I said, now understanding her mortality.

"There may be a method now to kill me," she said, "but there is no reason. It makes no difference whether I am dead or alive. It is easier to let me live than make the effort to destroy these lands. So, here I am. Still alive."

"You're revered by the people here," I interrupted.

"That is true. They admire me, worship me, look up to me. But they forget the fact that I am alive, too," she said.

I was still unclear. "I don't understand what you're trying to say."

"I stay alive, and everyone else dies." So she was left alone. That's why she's lonely. That's why she created Shiromaru, to have a companion that would stay by her side. To endure immortality with her.

"What changed three hundred years ago? Did you not feel lonely before then?" I asked. She pressed her forehead against my chest. My arms stayed lax by my sides. I couldn't hold her; I felt it wasn't my place to.

"What happened?" I asked again.

"You could say, I can't relate to the Golden Bough." I stayed silent, not knowing what she was referring to. She noticed and smiled, commenting I wasn't as well-read as I looked.

"It's a book written by a knight," she explained.

"How do you know about things like knighthood?" I questioned.

"I'm glad you asked," she said, puffing out her chest proudly. She pulled out a piece of paper and waved it under my nose.

"A library card?" I exclaimed. I was not expecting that.

"I applied for it," Shiro said with a smile. With only a few lights on the road, it was hard to make out what was on the card. I squinted to read her name, 'Shiro' printed on the card. Right under it, penned in neat letters, were the words: No expiry date. I imagined the librarian writing that down for her noisy, immortal guest and chuckled.

"What are you laughing at?" Shiro asked with a groan.

"Nothing. So what about the Golden Bough?" I asked.

"The book taught me that any god that's shaped like a man must die," she said glumly. Because she stood so proudly, I almost missed the flash of darkness in her eyes.

"A god must die?" I asked, bewildered by the statement.

"It was a series of books several hundred pages long," Shiro continued, "documenting the beliefs and myths of many lands. I read a story about a god slayer and a tree. It isn't unusual to read a story about a god being killed, but in this story they used the term 'god' more figuratively."

I nodded. "So it's not about an actual god like you."

"No," she responded. "It was about people with enough authority to act like one. Someone the masses worshiped and blindly believed in. That type of god. And so..." She paused for a moment and smiled to herself, "Even a renowned academic who spent his life studying

beliefs and religions couldn't explain to me what a real god, like me, is." She wasn't going to be killed and therefore was immortal.

"So that's what you meant when you said that you can't relate to the Golden Bough, but that still doesn't answer my question about Shiromaru."

She nodded. "I know, but it was necessary for you to know about that." I asked her once again, "What happened three hundred years ago?"

"It was a night like this." Shiro turned toward Ookami Mountain. "I found a girl that wandered into the mountains. She was going to die even if I tried to save her."

"Even with your godly powers?" I asked, bewildered by the statement.

"No god stoops to save a single soul," she responded, cold as the snow.

"But in history..." I began to argue.

"Miracles aren't performed by gods; they are just coincidences that happened to be beneficial to the humans who labeled them as miracles," Shiro explained. "Surely, you of all people wouldn't expect a god or the world to show kindness or mercy. Anyways, I heard the girl's last wishes. She was so small, something so tiny of no importance to a god that she would have been easily ignored like a speck of dust. But I heard her, and she intrigued me. She had a fire in her, a will so strong to grasp at life even as it ebbed from her. You may call it regret or hope; I don't know. But I was moved."

Shiro turned to me. "And now I have developed a weakness: human feelings. Passion. Love." Her smile hardened. Perhaps she was regretting it. Or was she simply reminiscing? I didn't know what her smile meant. "It's the one thing that spins the world out of control, as

history proves," she said with a sigh. I didn't need any further explanation to understand that; I simply nodded. She was simply a form of power before, with no preferences or complexity. She had no feelings or thoughts, only power. That was the one thing that set her apart from everything else. And people believed it to be a miracle, something divine, so they worshiped her.

"But... what am I now?" she questioned. "I've purposely divided myself to create a companion; I lick the lids of ice-cream tubs, take a lover once every hundred years, and now I am infatuated with you, a simple boy. I'm hopeless. And even worse, I'm enjoying every bit of it." She was asking if it was something forgivable. Her mouth was twisted in uncertainty, but her eyes glittered with fire, as if daring me to judge her. She was angry, yet proud, to be what she was. She was balancing herself between two contradictions.

"What about children?" I didn't have an answer for her, so I changed the subject. "I've had a few, but they aren't tied to the land like I am. They left as soon as they could," she sighed. "Just like any teenager would," I said, wanting to go home. This wasn't a topic that interested me. "I can't forgive myself, but yet I like what I have become. You, Masaki, should understand me above all people. Because you were drawn to me because of this contradiction that I have, weren't you?" She took my hand from my pocket. The wind was cold, and the heat in my body left as soon as my hand was exposed to the air. She pressed my palm against her cheek.

"You're only interested in me because I'm a god, aren't you?" she asked. I stopped breathing for a moment. All sorts of thoughts, excuses, and reasons ran through my head. Despite all of that, in the empty space of my mind, I found that she was telling the truth. She was a god, yet a girl. She was human, yet complete. The snow fell endlessly. These mountains were sacred, or so people said. I met her here. She captivated me. I'd never met a god before. It felt unreal, and that was why I was drawn to her. Shiro understood what I was.

She understood what I was. I could feel the heat on her cheeks through my palms. I let out a breath.

"You're warm," I said.

"I'm alive," she replied. Which was why-

"You don't find any value in me personally." She saw right through me.

"No, I don't," I answered.

"You only value me for what I am, a god in the form of a girl. Not for who I am. You only stay by my side because you're interested in what I am supposed to be," she questioned.

"Yes," I responded.

"Why are you attracted to Yuki, then?" she asked. I remembered Kouhei asking me something similar. "It was the first time anybody asked me out like that, the moment she met me." Shiro scowled slightly.

"Didn't I do the same thing?" She was right but...

"It's different; Yuki doesn't have a reason." Shiro just shook her head.

"I don't get you."

"You're a god, and she's a human," I tried to explain myself. "You both asked me out the moment you met me. But Yuki, unlike you, had never done anything like that before. I didn't understand why she would do that. You commanded me, with certainty that I would obey. You're a goddess, and it seemed fitting for you to demand things. I didn't think I was a special case for you because it looked like the most natural thing for you to do, to simply ask for what you want. But it's not the same for Yuki. Everything went too fast. Something inside me, something inside her crossed the line almost

instantly. I didn't understand what it was. Everyone says Yuki just did it impulsively, but if it really was just that, I wouldn't have let her in. I wanted to know what it was. Also... I thought she was pretty hot."

"You're hopeless," Shiro rolled her eyes and laughed. I felt the movement of her cheek under my palm. Shiro was smiling widely now. "If you want to understand it, why deny her?" she asked. "Why not take the next step in the relationship? Wouldn't you want to experiment?"

"Because..." I sighed, but Shiro interrupted. "Are you afraid she won't turn out to be what you hoped she would be?"

"No, it's not that." I paused and simply muttered, "It's... because I'm shy."

"WHAT?!" Shiro's eyes widened.

"I mean, she's asking me how to make a baby! How would I explain something like that!?" I exclaimed. It wasn't a conversation I was looking forward to. "I can't just open our textbooks and go through it saying, 'This is what you do, and then we do this...', and she's bound to ask all sorts of awkward questions!"

"So that's why you were talking about the stork," Shiro said.

"Got any problem with that?" I retorted.

"I didn't think you'd turn into a naive little boy when it came to things like that. How cute," Shiro began laughing.

She rubbed her cheek against my palm. I could feel the heat in my palm spread towards my face.

"Well then, why don't you just choose me?" she suggested, lowering my hand from her cheek and placing it on her left breast.

"I don't need any stork," she said with a smirk. I could feel her heartbeat.

I was left speechless. What was I supposed to say to her? She had her head bowed down, as if she was embarrassed.

"You're acting like a girl," I commented.

"No, I'm a god," she replied.

"Your cheeks have turned pink too," I observed.

"It's from the cold," she lied.

"And your heart's beating really fast," I added. I could feel it going in sync with mine. It was so fast, so hot.

"Masaki..." she said, looking up at me from under her lashes. I didn't feel cold anymore. It was like we were cut off from the rest of the world. My senses condensed to my palm where it was connected to her chest. The beating of it brought me back to reality each time it pulsed in my hand. I was going back and forth. It was maddening. "Shiro," I called out to her-

"What are you doing?" Yuki's voice broke me out of my trance. Her expression was colder than the snow around us. Right next to her was Mizuho, looking at me like I was the worst criminal to walk the earth.

I completely stiffened.

"I said, what are you doing?" Yuki repeated with a snarl.

My palm was still resting on Shiro's breast, but I could feel my temperature drop down to zero at an alarming rate. The wind whistled around us. Yuki's long hair was caught in a gust, covering her face for a brief moment. She looked more convincing as a yuki-onna than Shiro was a legendary goddess.

"Um, this is because..." I stammered. In my mind, I wondered why in situations like this, it's always the men that start making excuses first. Yuki retained her stone-cold demeanor. From the looks of it, she was either waiting for my explanation or deciding whether or not to cut me down.

I thought about a myriad of things to say. I had to move my mouth, I had to do something...

"Well, that was bad timing!" Shiro said, taking a step back. She grinned at me with a look far from the girl she was a minute ago. She had returned to her arrogant, demanding self again.

"And I almost succeeded in seducing him if you hadn't come along, you gooseberry," she taunted.

"Is that all you have to say?" Yuki growled.

"Oooh, scary. Well then, Masaki, we'll have to continue our baby-making on another day. See you later!" And with that, she hopped into the nearby Yashiro and disappeared, abandoning me. I didn't want Shiro to leave. Now that she was gone, it was just me and Yuki. She didn't move a muscle, and it was terrifying.

Think fast!! "Um, I was at Kouhei's..." I began, trying to buy myself time by explaining what happened in my day chronologically.

"Hand," Yuki commanded. I was thrown off by her sudden remark. My hand was still frozen in an outstretched position, shaped in a cup where Shiro's breast was.

"Did you like Shiro-sama's boobs THAT much?" she yelled. I could almost hear the veins in her forehead expand. I should have dropped to my knees and begged for forgiveness right then, but I couldn't move out of dread.

"Are you mad?" I asked, as if the answer wasn't obvious.

"No, I'm extremely calm." She pulled out a stick the length of her height, wrapped in cloth, and began untying it. The sound of the ribbons holding the cloth being tugged apart had a frightening effect on me.

"I'm really calm, I'm not angry at- at- at- the fact you were squeezing that goddess' boobs until you could see handprints on them. I'm calm, I'M VERY CALM!"

"You're not calm at all!" I shouted.

"You're absolutely right, I should admit that," she said, letting out a breath. Even if I couldn't see her expression because she had her head bowed, I was relieved that she had at least calmed down enough to hold a conversation.

"Please don't give up on calming yourself down! Hear me out!" I pleaded.

"Why didn't you just ask me if you wanted to touch boobs?" she demanded.

"You're angry about that!? You should be proud of me that I've been Masaki 'Chivalrous' Konno!" I replied.

"Chivalrous, huh?" Yuki said, lifting her face. Her demeanor had changed, but I could still see the anger simmering beneath the surface. "If you're truly chivalrous, I expect you to accept my offer honorably."

"Uh, Yuki?" I asked nervously.

The cloth came undone and dropped in a heap onto the snow.

"You either die now with no complaints, or duel me to the death." There in her hand, her naginata, Kubikirimaru, glinted in the moonlight.

"Y-Yuki!?" I squawked. It came out funny, I wasn't even sure if I was pleading or surprised.

"Mizuho did suggest I should be more physical, I should take her advice." She lifted her face, and there sliced across it was the most horrific smile. "Kubikirimaru wants blood tonight."

I don't remember when or how I got home, and on top of that, there was this conversation I had with my mom as she dressed my wounds.

"Mommy's always wanted a little boy with a cross-scar on his cheek!" she said.

"Mom, the naginata girl that chased me about wasn't as lenient as the person you're thinking about. She definitely doesn't live by the words 'I shall not take another's life'."

"But I think it's your own fault you got yourself into this, you know? You should stuff some books under your belt for protection."

"She'd probably stab right through them."

"Then you'll just have to die for your sins!"

I had nobody on my side.

Mashiro & Yuki

"Gochisousama deshita." Yuki put her chopsticks down and placed her palms together.

"Is that all you're having?" Ayumu, Yuki's father, stopped his chopsticks mid-air in surprise. Yuki had barely touched the food before her. "I have no appetite," she sighed.

"It's been three days since you started eating like that. Or should I say, stopped eating. What's wrong? Are you ill?" Mashiro asked, furrowing a brow. Yuki knew her impassive expression came from her mother.

"I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't waste food this way. A Towada should never waste the efforts of our farmers," she said with a sigh.

"You're right on that count," Mashiro nodded. "If we were having a meal with guests, I would have punished you for leaving your food like that."

"Mashiro-san..." Ayumu frowned in disapproval, but because he had such a young face, it was hardly intimidating.

"However," Mashiro continued, "we are simply having a meal in private, so I shan't. What is it, Yuki? Something is troubling you." Mashiro looked into her daughter's eyes, probing for an answer. Yuki straightened her back to face her mother.

Mashiro was smiling. It was the smile of a powerful woman who was in full control of every movement she made. Yuki took a breath. It was tiring to face her mother, and she could feel her defenses being eroded just by being close to her.

"I want a baby," Yuki said, as her father dropped his chopsticks and his jaw.

"Oh my," Mashiro said, covering her mouth in surprise. "I know you love children."

"I do," Yuki affirmed.

"And having one of your own is the best thing possible. I know because that's what I felt when I had you. I see you've come to the age where you've decided it's time for you to have one too," Mashiro said with a smile.

"I am proud as I am grateful to be your child, Mother," Yuki said with a bow.

"Wait!" Ayumu exclaimed, hoping to have a say in the matter. "Yuki, you're too young to be talking about having children. Mashiro-san, you shouldn't support her on this matter, it's too early!"

"Ayumu-san, your eyes are darting everywhere," Mashiro giggled. It was a laugh she reserved for her husband.

"No, no, absolutely not, it's too early! You're still a student. You have studies," Ayumu protested, shaking his head.

"Nothing is more important than holding my own child in my hands," Yuki insisted, her voice unwavering.

"You sound so sure of yourself, and that's very good, but no!" Ayumu maintained. "Mashiro-san, you should know. Children are very demanding, there are many issues to consider when you have children. I'm against this! Yuki, you need more time to enjoy your youth..."

"What issues?" Yuki and Mashiro asked in unison.

"Like money!" Ayumu exclaimed, exasperated.

"I have enough from my stocks," Yuki replied confidently.

"Of course, I would be inclined to give whatever support my daughter needs to bring up my grandchild," Mashiro added, her voice calm and reassuring.

"You two... why are you so positive about this?" Ayumu asked, bewildered.

"Father, why are you so negative about it?" Yuki countered, her eyes narrowing.

"Well... how about your reputation?" Ayumu stammered, unsure.

"Do you really think that I would care what other people thought about me?" Yuki glared back, her eyes blazing with defiance.

"Mother, would you be worried that I will damage the Towada name?" Yuki asked, turning towards her mother.

"Nothing of that sort will happen. Names do not get damaged, only people do," Mashiro paused to look at her husband.

"M-Mashiro-san?"

"You know we don't have the right to stop Yuki on this," Mashiro replied firmly.

Ayumu hesitated, then his shoulders dropped in defeat. "Oh, well..." he mumbled to himself.

"Who is the boy you want to have your baby with?" Mashiro asked, leaning forward eagerly. Her eyes were bright with curiosity.

"That's the problem."

"Tell me more," Mashiro said, leaning even closer, her interest piqued.

"He won't tell me how to make a baby."

"Oh, that's easy! You just get him naked-"

"AAAAAAH LALALALA-LALA-!!"

"F-father!?" Yuki was startled at her father's sudden outburst.

"After that, you position yourself on top of his p-"

"NOOOO!! BOOM SHAKALAKA!!" Ayumu continued, trying his best to protect his daughter's innocence.

"Mother, I'm beginning to feel sorry for father. Please stop."

"Ayumu-san's so fun to tease, I couldn't help myself."

"Besides, I don't think it would mean much to me if someone else told me how it works. It has to be Masaki."

"And he's reluctant?" Mashiro probed.

"Maybe he has the same reasoning as father does. Maybe it has to do with reputation," Yuki mused.

"Perhaps, but I find that highly doubtful coming from a young man."

"I think it might be because he doesn't love me," Yuki said as her head drooped. It hurt her to admit it. She could feel her eyes burn, and tears began to well up despite her best efforts to push them down.

"You're going out with him, are you not?" Mashiro inquired.

"Yes, I am, but I'm not the only one," Yuki replied, her voice tinged with sadness.

Mashiro's expression hardened. "You are a Towada woman, and yet you allow yourself to go out with a two-timer?" she said, her voice cold as ice.

"Masaki is dating Shiro-sama as well, but I am sure he does not love her either."

"Was he the one that initiated it?" Mashiro asked, her tone skeptical.

"No, it was Shiro-sama that did," Yuki explained.

"A god giving favor to a human..." Mashiro was speechless at the revelation.

"I do not know what Shiro-sama intends to do with him, but I know one thing," Yuki said as her mother raised an eyebrow. "I know that both Shiro-sama and I love Masaki so, so much..."

"Oh dear," Mashiro said as she shook her head.

"Mother, what should I do?"

"I cannot give you an answer, but I can give you some advice."

"Please do."

"Stay a Towada woman."

Yuki had suspected that was what her mother would say. It was her mantra from youth. It meant it was alright to be afraid, but it was not alright to back down from a cause.

"Thank you." Placing her fingers on the tatami mat, Yuki bowed deeply.

"I, Towada Yuki, will never forget your words. I promise I shall live by them."

The Towada customs were etched into her deeply.

"Ayumu-san, won't you give your daughter your support?" Mashiro urged.

"I suppose I have no choice." Ayumu smiled somewhat wistfully. Being married into the Towada family, Ayumu had seen many Towada women from near and far. By now, he had learned that there was no way other than the Towada way. But still, he had to make his opinion known for what he believed to be the sake of his child. It was a losing battle, but an honorable one.

Which was why Yuki felt bad for defying her father. But she was Towada Yuki, a Towada woman, and she could not let this go.

"On a related topic," Ayumu said as he looked to the ceiling, "Can you tell me more about Masaki-kun?"

Not quite ready to commit

I went to school with a large gauze bandage on my cheek and some scars on my arms.

"What did you get yourself into?" Kouhei asked as he opened his bento box.

"Yuki happened," I answered.

"Ah," he uttered, seemingly satisfied with that answer.

"You deserve it, though!" Sanae scolded.

"Filthy two-timing cheater!" Mizuho was openly showing her disgust for me.

"I guess my only ally here is you, Kouhei," I said with a sigh.

"Masaki," Kouhei nodded in understanding with a benevolent smile. He had heard everything from Mizuho. "You're sick, you know that?"

"You're all my enemies?!"

"I'd be surprised if anyone took your side after what you did," Sanae said.

"But I didn't do anything, Shiro-sama did."

"All guys use that as an excuse, don't they, onii-chan?" Mizuho accused.

"Why are you asking me?" Kouhei questioned. "Although, I do admit I can't deny that with certainty."

"But...!"

"Hey Sanae, your tamagoyaki looks yummy," Kouhei commented.

"I just mixed in the leftovers from yesterday," she replied.

"Somebody, please listen to me!" I pleaded.

"Can't hear anything," Mizuho chimed.

Nobody wanted to listen to my side of the story. I noticed Yuki's and my name popped out everywhere during the buzz of lunchtime, and occasionally someone would look my way with pitying eyes. And my friends, who had their desks conjoined for lunch as usual, were happily eating their food, ignoring me.

My desk was bare. I had nothing to eat. Yuki's desk was vacant. For the past four days, Yuki had been extremely angry with me, and I hadn't seen her. So, this morning I asked Mom if she could make me some lunch.

Her exact words were, "Mommy never brought you up to be a cheater! Go hungry and repent!"

Even my family wasn't on my side. Besides, technically, I wasn't really cheating. It was a known fact that Shiro-sama was my girlfriend too.

"Hffffff." I let out a long sigh. I was hungry. I rummaged through my pockets. All I had were my house keys and a few coins. Maybe if I went to the school canteen, I could get some cheap bread. I stood up from my seat, but then-

"Excuse me, where do you think you're going?" Yuki's voice pierced through the room.

"The princess arrives!" Kouhei teased. I was too surprised to notice.

"Sit down," Yuki commanded as she sat in her usual seat. At the same time, Kouhei, Sanae, and Mizuho moved their bento boxes to make some room for her.

Yuki placed the large, two-tiered bento box on the desk. The scar under my gauze bandage throbbed, as if to remind me of something.

She was unraveling the furoshiki around the bento box with her long slender fingers, and I was just standing there watching her like an idiot. Should I make an excuse? Should I take my leave?

In the end, I chose to sit down and accept my punishment. I wasn't really sure whether or not that was the smart thing to do, but still.

"How are your injuries?" Yuki asked.

"They hurt," I replied.

"You deserved it," she quipped. I couldn't say anything back.

"I'll have you know, I'm not angry anymore," she assured.

"I'm glad to hear that." I really hoped it was true, but things seemed to be looking better. If she had made my lunch too, she couldn't be that angry with me anymore, right?

As she lifted the lid, everybody stared at the contents of the bento box and blinked.

"Eat up," Yuki beckoned. Right in the middle of the first tier of the Ojuu was a block of diet food biscuit.

"Itadakimasu." Yuki placed her palms together in a quick prayer and reached out for her block of diet biscuit.

I waved my biscuit around, not knowing what to say. "I deserve this as my punishment, but you..."

"Your punishment is my punishment," she said.

She was punishing herself for what I did when she wasn't in the wrong. It was worse than I imagined.

"She's evil," Kouhei said.

"Ee-vil!" Sanae chimed in.

Was Yuki doing this because she knew I wouldn't have minded so much if I was being punished alone?

"I'm sorry," I whispered. She didn't reply. I took a bite.

"How does it taste?" she asked. I knew she would scold me if I replied with my mouth full, so I chewed it carefully and swallowed before giving my answer.

"It doesn't taste like anything." I gave her an honest reply. Most diet biscuits were flavored, but this just dried my mouth out and tasted like nothing at all.

"Impossible!" Yuki lunged forward in disbelief. "Let me see."

"Maybe you brought the wrong biscuit?" I brought the biscuit up close to her nose so she could take a sniff.

"Nom." She took a bite, chewing with a look of great determination, her eyes on the desk, concentrating on the senses of her tongue.

"That's not true," she responded. "It tastes like rice. The more you chew, the more flavorful it gets."

"You're talking like a granny from the rice farms."

"And you're talking like a city boy that doesn't know any better."

"Well, excuse me," I said with an eye roll.

So we halved our diet biscuits and shared. Yuki's red bean rice flavored biscuit was just as bad as mine.

"Um," Mizuho whispered, "They're...fighting, aren't they?"

"They were," Kouhei sighed.

"But not anymore! And I'm sure they don't even realize how cheesy it all looks." Sanae smiled.

"Wait, didn't they just indirectly kiss each other!?" Kouhei commented.

"Onii-chan, you've got a perverted mind," Mizuho said.

"Ouch!" Kouhei responded.

From then on, it was as if nothing had happened. We chatted amiably about the New Year party they had each year at the Tagami shrine, and lunch hour ended with no other conflict.

Mashiro Intervenes

I knew Yuki came from a powerful family, but I had probably underestimated the influence of the Towada clan.

It was fifth period, the class right after lunch, when we were all feeling a bit lazy with our stomachs full and weren't paying much attention. I, as usual, was listening to the droning of our math teacher with little interest.

"And so, Galois, whose mathematical theories were too advanced for his time, lost all hope. He agreed to participate in a duel for the woman he loved, and there he perished," he ranted.

The blackboard was filled with notes about the mathematician's life instead of equations. Our teacher was known for ignoring the school curriculum and talking about the historical figures of mathematics as he pleased.

"At least it's amusing," I muttered as I made a few notes absentmindedly. People probably wouldn't be able to tell this was a math class judging from my notes. I smiled to myself. Our math teacher was beginning to speak passionately about something. I remembered Kouhei mentioning before that when they were on the topic of Leibniz, it took him two weeks to finish talking about his life and values. I would have been interested in Leibniz.

"Duel for the woman he loved," I read my notes. There was a man willing to throw his life away for a single woman. It was something I couldn't relate to, something unreal. That's why it caught my attention, and I kept on listening to what he had to say.

Did I have anybody I was willing to die for? Yuki? Shiro? I was pretty sure they would have said yes, they would die for me.

I sounded so arrogant in my head, I grimaced.

Their loyalty lay in a place so far away from me. Whereas me?

I was sure I would say no. I would easily cut either of them off to save myself.

I was in awe of Shiro being a goddess and admired Yuki's directness.

It was enough to keep me interested but not enough for me to make a decision, let alone a sacrifice. Plus, there wasn't a need for one so far.

If I chose either of them, the reality of it just being that would impact me.

So I didn't choose. I stayed suspended between both of them.

Was this a mistake? No, it was not a mistake.

It was snowing heavily outside the window. The clock above the blackboard struck half-past one.

There was a knock on the door. It caught everyone's attention.

"Principal...is there anything you need?" the teacher asked as the door slid open.

Baldy, otherwise known as our school principal, called out from his position by the door.

Then, a woman garbed in a kimono, Mashiro Towada, stepped into the classroom.

"Is Masaki Konno here?" she asked.

The math teacher fell back. Mashiro Towada stepped up to the lectern as if it were the most natural thing to do and rested her palms

on its surface. She scoured the room with the look of a woman who was used to standing above everyone and everything.

And I instantly disliked her.

Everybody kept their silence, frozen in their seats. Nobody could grasp the situation.

"Anybody?" Mashiro smiled softly at the classroom. As if her smile brought them to life, one by one, everyone began to relax and turn to look at me.

"So it's you," Mashiro eyed me with the smile still plastered on her face. I was now the center of attention.

I simply stared back at her.

"Hmm." Her eyes narrowed to small slits, and she seemed satisfied with what she saw.

I didn't like it.

She was the spitting image of Yuki, matured. It was exhausting just to face her, for she had a way of stripping your defenses, exposing your vulnerabilities just by a look. I thought she was the perfected version of what Yuki's cool, hardened exterior was to become.

"Don't you know it's impolite to stare?" she asked. I kept quiet.

I could see Kouhei turn to look at me worriedly from the corner of my eye. I just kept on glaring at Mashiro Towada.

Slowly, a murmur began to spread through the classroom.

"What does he think he's doing, glaring at a Towada woman? Doesn't he know the consequences?" I heard a guy whisper.

"How does Konno keep his cool like that?" All of the students had turned pale.

"You obviously dislike me," Mashiro said as she walked towards me.

She stopped at my side. It was quite obvious who had the upper hand; how much power did the Towada woman have?

If people could live by different rules from other people, her eyes were proof it could be done.

"Am I correct to assume you're Masaki Konno?" she questioned. I wasn't keeping my cool at all; in fact, I was furious.

"I refuse," I blurted.

"I haven't even asked anything of you," she said.

"But you came for something," I waited for her answer. She abruptly took her eyes off of me.

"Duel for the woman he loved." Her gaze had dropped to my notebook. "How romantic."

"I said I refuse." I maintained.

"If that is the case, will you cut your ties with my daughter?" she demanded.

"I refuse to do that too."

"Which is what brings me here." Her smile cracked, and she finally looked up, acknowledging me as the enemy.

"So that's your real face." I commented.

"I want a word with you." And with that, she turned around and walked out of the room.

I couldn't help but notice the smooth white skin of her nape, so similar to Yuki's.

The classroom was buzzing now. I reached out for my pencil. I had no intention of obeying her at all.

I hated the way she never looked back once, as if she was sure I would be at her beck and call.

And it was as if she purposely did that knowing I would acknowledge my own arrogance in self reflection.

But then, Our school principal looked back and forth between me and Mashiro.

At first, Baldy glared at me condescendingly. And then, he thought twice, and began bowing to me several times, begging me to go after her.

That was how it was. If you offended a Towada in these lands, it was hard to live. I remembered the blurb about the school receiving large donations from Towada.

"I don't like this one bit," I muttered as I stood up from my seat.

The class gasped like audiences of a sitcom.

I disliked Yuki's mother, but I disliked putting people that had nothing to do with my relationship with Yuki in trouble too.

I was sure I wasn't going to return to school after whatever was awaiting me, so I began to pack my bag.

"Masaki," Kouhei called out to me just as I was about to leave. "I hope things don't turn out too badly."

Because he knew the details of my relationship with Yuki, he had a notion of what Mashiro wanted from me.

"Maybe it's not going to end this lightly," I joked as I pointed at the bandage on my cheek.

I was surprised at my candor, apparently I could still make a joke even when I was seething.

I walked down the corridor, bracing myself from the cold, and what was to come.

There was a shiny black car parked outside of the school gates waiting for me. I slid into the back seat next to Mashiro.

"I like people with some backbone," she smiled.

Back in the classroom, the students had burst into an excited buzz.

The door was left wide open, and people gaped at the opening in anticipation Mashiro would make another appearance.

The math teacher had given up on continuing with his class. Everyone was too busy gossiping and making conjectures as to what would happen to Masaki.

However, Kouhei Touyama kept his cool. He turned his head towards the front row of the class.

There, by the desk closest to the corridor, Sanae Morino sat just as quietly in her seat.

She turned and met his eyes, and they nodded at each other.

"Sir, we're going to have a stomach ache soon so we are taking sick leave! Excuse us please!" they said in unison.

Before the teacher had realized it, Kouhei and Sanae had grabbed their bags and left the classroom.

On their way out, they went to pick up Mizuho.

"What's the matter Onii-chan? I'm in the middle of class... what!? Masaki-san is... Oh! Of course I'll go!! Don't leave me!!"

Yet again, Mizuho proved herself to be one of the worst Heads of the Student Council in the school's history.

The three ran after the tire tracks that led away from the school gates.

At the end of the trail would be the Towada estate, the home of the most powerful family in their town.

Meanwhile, at the dojo built in a separate building from the main estate.

I sat formally on the floor, my legs bent under me. They were numb from sitting too long, but I concentrated on keeping my back straight and my expression blank.

The wooden floor was cold and hard, but since my legs were numb anyway, I didn't care too much.

"You may sit in a more comfortable position if you would like to," Mashiro said. It was the first thing she had said in an hour.

"Is that your way of showing consideration to a city boy?" I asked her dryly.

She had been sitting in Seiza for just as long as I had, but she seemed used to it and retained a comfortable ease.

"Stretch your legs," she commanded coldly.

"I thought you were big on manners," I commented.

"I am trying to remove any possibility of you making excuses," she explained.

I didn't understand what she meant, but even so, I stretched out my legs and moved into a more comfortable sitting position.

I could feel the blood rush to my toes, and I was sure they would regain feeling soon.

The tea that had been served sat untouched on the floor. It had turned as cold as the air by now.

"Are you unfamiliar with a Dojo?" Mashiro questioned.

"Yes," I replied honestly.

There were a few mantras written in calligraphy hanging on the Dojo walls.

"Do you have a background in Bujutsu?" she continued.

"No," I answered.

"Really?" she probed. I didn't know what her intention was.

Why did she doubt I was lying?

"You are too calm. Most men who face me would show some signs of discomfort or nervousness. That's why I thought perhaps you had been disciplined in some manner," she explained.

I noticed a square wooden box filled with practice swords and spears of all sorts placed in a corner of the dojo. It resembled a large umbrella stand to me.

"I only seem calm because the situation is unreal to me," I replied.

"Unreal? You don't think this is reality?" Mashiro questioned.

"It is reality, but it's unrealistic," I explained.

"You say the most peculiar things," she responded.

I was sure the fifth period would be over at school by now, and here I was sitting face-to-face with the head of the Towada family.

This was not where I belonged. I wasn't being myself here. The further I was from my everyday life, the easier it was to look at the situation with a stranger's calm eye.

The numbness in my legs began to ebb away.

"How long do you intend to stay silent?" I asked, not wanting to waste any more time.

"Finally, you're willing to have a conversation with me!" Mashiro laughed gleefully, and I was taken aback at how young she looked when she did that.

"I've heard a lot about you from Yuki last night," she said.

"I assume you've heard about the reason why I have scars on my face as well," I replied.

"I heard you screamed like a girl," she said.

"I never thought I'd live to face someone with a weapon in hand," I said.

"It was your fault, you know," she smiled.

Strangely, I didn't feel that irritated by her smirking at me.

The look she gave me now was one of a curious girl with twinkling eyes.

"Masaki-san, am I right to think you're dating my daughter?" she asked.

"Yes," I confirmed.

"But you do not love her?" she continued, her eyes narrowing.

"Correct," I replied firmly.

"Why are you dating her then?" she inquired, her voice tinged with curiosity.

"I think she has a pretty face and a nice figure," I answered honestly.

"I am beginning to wonder if I should end your life right here, right now," she said with a dangerous edge in her tone.

"As any mother should," I muttered, trying to maintain my composure.

"Do you not realize I have the power to make life hell for you in this town if you anger me?" she warned, her gaze piercing.

"I'm furious right now. I don't care what you do," I retorted, my voice rising.

"Besides," she ignored me and continued, "Don't you think you should be diplomatic in case you need to ask for my daughter's hand in the future?"

"I-I'm not going to...!!" I stammered, feeling flustered.

"Why get flustered at that idea?... Hmmm." she mused, a smirk playing on her lips.

"What is it?" I asked, taking the cold tea cup in my hand.

I took a big mouthful, since my throat had suddenly gone dry.

"Aren't you interested in making a baby with Yuki?" she asked, her tone teasing.

"Bfffff!!!!" I choked and sprayed the tea all over myself.

I coughed and hacked, trying to get the leftover tea out of my airway.

So much for staying calm.

"My, my... aren't you an easy one to tease," she chuckled, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

A servant quickly came in to wipe the floor, and then left.

I was being tested, studied, assessed by Mashiro.

And I hated it.

"I'm leaving," I declared, standing up.

"Oh, she's home," Mashiro remarked, her eyes shifting behind me.

"Mother!" I heard a familiar voice yell from behind me as I stood up.

Yuki stormed into the dojo panting hard. She was wet from the snow and looked flushed, but didn't seem to notice the state she was in.

"How in the world do you manage to move so fast in that kimono?" Kouhei cried as he followed suit, panting hard, with Mizuho by his side.

Sanae came in after, but she seemed put together compared to the other two.

"Mother, what is the meaning of this!?" Yuki demanded, her voice shaking with anger.

"Choose your weapon, Yuki," Mashiro instructed, her tone cold.

"Please explain!" Yuki was livid.

"You are going to fight this boy right now," Mashiro said calmly.

"I want to test him, I'm sure you understand."

"Test him? What for?" Yuki asked, bewildered.

"He does not love you," Mashiro stated plainly.

"I know," Yuki admitted, her voice quiet.

"But yet, he is dating you. Furthermore, he's dating that goddess too. I don't understand him; I simply can't figure out what kind of a person he is. Don't you think it's natural for me to want to learn more about him?" Mashiro continued, her eyes locked on me.

"That doesn't give you the right-" Yuki began, but Mashiro cut her off.

"If either of you refuse, I shall separate the both of you using all of my power," Mashiro threatened, her smile cold.

Mashiro smiled coldly, fully aware of her daughter's outrage.

It was obvious who had the upper hand.

"You look as if this has nothing to do with you," Mashiro remarked, her gaze shifting to me.

"Does it?" I asked, my voice steady.

"Aren't you worried how this would affect your family?" she pressed.

I remembered the way Baldy bowed, how anxious he looked.

If Towada made it known we were an enemy to them, life would become extremely hard.

If the local shops refused to sell to us, that alone would be a problem.

"Now it does have something to do with you, doesn't it?" Mashiro said, a hint of satisfaction in her voice.

I could feel Yuki shaking in anger behind me.

"You bitch," I muttered under my breath.

"Mind your tongue!" she snapped. "You may not like it, but you will have to go through with it."

I faced Mashiro.

"I told you before, I don't have any experience in martial arts," I reminded her.

"Do you really think I'm making you two fight because I want to see which one of you wins? I want to see how you would fight. I want to see the raw, primal part of you," Mashiro explained, her eyes narrowing.

"As you wish," I said, remembering hearing that a person's worth can be seen at the brink of life and death.

"Auntie Mashiro," Kouhei stepped forward. "This isn't fair-"

"Did you just call me auntie?" Mashiro interrupted, her glare rendering Kouhei useless.

Mizuho was looking worried, glancing back and forth at me and Yuki.

Sanae behaved just the way she always did.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "And my weapon?"

"You may choose what you please." She pointed at the box in the corner of the dojo.

"Masaki," Yuki looked at me.

I turned towards her and asked, "Have you calmed down?"

"Are you sure about this?" she asked, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

"We don't really have a choice." As I always say, reality is merciless.

"My feelings won't change no matter what mother tries to do," she insisted.

"But mine will," I said, shaking my head.

"What do you mean?" Yuki asked, her brow furrowing.

With my hands in my pockets, I made my way to the box full of weapons. I sifted through my pockets to see what I had there.

"I mean I would lose interest in you," I explained, my voice calm and measured.

She stood there, looking unsure, looking insecure.

She was just a normal girl, and that wasn't the Yuki Towada I was attracted to.

"The way you're behaving right now, just like everybody else, I wouldn't care whether you were dead or alive," I said bluntly.

I picked out a wooden sword with one hand. I had only handled one of these before in PE class in secondary school.

"Hey! Masaki-san, that's just cruel!" Mizuho yelled, but I ignored her outburst.

"Do you hate me now?" Yuki asked, her voice trembling.

"I don't hate you, but I've never loved you either," I replied.

"But I was valuable to you?" she asked, a hint of desperation in her voice.

"Yes," I said as I kept rummaging through the weapon box.

"The Yuki I know would be eager to show that old woman that she made the right choice," I added.

"Old woman? I'm only 34!" the Head of Towada protested.

It might just be me, but I felt the Head of Towada was beginning to lose her intimidating stance.

"I see." Yuki nodded, determination returning to her eyes.

I faced Yuki again, now with a weapon in my hand.

"Then I'll need to prove to you my worth," she said, looking feral now.

"How careless of me, I had almost forgotten that I was a Towada woman," she continued. She reached out her hand, and a servant passed her a wooden naginata.

It had a blunt wooden blade, but it would still hurt if I was hit.

"So?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"So it is not enough just to force myself onto you," she replied.

"And?" I prompted.

"And I must make sure you stay by my side," Yuki said.

She was wearing that determined look on her face now, just like the day we met.

And that was certainly something worth fighting for.

"That's right. Glad you're back, Yuki," I said, smiling at her.

I picked another weapon, a wooden kodachi, and weighed it in my hand. It was a short sword, something between the length of a bokuto and a dagger.

I actually wanted something shorter, but it was the shortest sword available.

"Double-sword stance?" Yuki groaned. "Do you even have any experience?"

"I'll find my own way," I replied, determined.

I held the sword in my left hand upright, and the sword in my right with the blade facing down.

It was a little heavy, but manageable.

"Mashiro! Yuki!" a voice called out, accompanied by the loud thundering of footsteps.

"Oh, Ayumu-san, we were just about to begin," Mashiro said, turning to the newcomer.

"What is about to begin? What do you think you're doing, taking Masaki-kun out of school like that!?" Ayumu demanded.

I looked at the man that had just stormed in, and my eyebrows lifted in surprise. Judging from the conversation, he must be Yuki's father, but he looked so young. If someone told me he was in his late twenties, I would have believed it.

"But Ayumu-san," Mashiro said "You said you were interested to know what kind of person he was too. Besides..." She brushed Ayumu aside. "The two of them look eager to fight now."

She was right.

I could see only Yuki now.

And Yuki could only see me.

"Calm down, Mr. Towada," Sanae said, tapping on his shoulder.
"Here, have some of this!"

"This? This is..." he trailed off, looking at the bag in surprise.

"It's really good! Enjoy the show!" Sanae exclaimed with a grin.

It was popcorn.

Sanae was always Sanae.

"It's alright," I said without looking away from Yuki.

It took a moment for Ayumu to realize I was talking to him.

He turned to me.

"This won't take much time." I reassured him.

"You may begin." Mashiro called out.

I didn't like her commanding voice, but even so, I took a step forward.

Yuki swung her naginata sideways in a large arc.

Because her movements were large, I had time to react, and I jumped back.

Even so, the tip of the blade caught my shirt and I was slammed against the wall.

I was expecting the blow, and yet I couldn't defend myself completely.

I didn't like the situation I was in.

Not one bit.

Mashiro Towada was using her power to make me bend to her will.

She was toying with me, trying to study me, read me for what I was.

It wasn't something I could let her do.

And yet, I couldn't stop her.

"Aren't you going to attack?" she asked, her voice calm and steady.

"I will," I replied, determination surging through me.

Yuki moved so fast, I couldn't see what was happening.

I lifted my left arm in defense, twisted my body to the right instinctively.

The naginata hit my kodachi, sending vibrations up my arm.

It scraped my shoulder and swung up in a whipping arc, its blade centimeters from my face.

I lunged forward, but Yuki had already sprung backwards out of my reach.

She clasped her naginata with both hands.

She thrust.

I couldn't meet her blow with my kodachi again, and jumped sideways to avoid being hit.

I landed on my shoulder.

Ignoring the pain, I rolled.

"I can read your every move." Yuki declared as I stood back up.

I was already breathing heavily.

Yuki, on the other hand, had barely moved from the spot she started in.

I realized she didn't attack me while I was down, simply because she was giving herself time to figure out my habits when I fought.

Yuki Towada intended to defeat me thoroughly.

Unlike me, anxiously gripping onto my weapons until my knuckles turned white, Yuki was relaxed.

It wouldn't be so easy next.

Yuki wasn't going to let me off just because she loved me.

And I couldn't be happier.

THIS was the girl I was attracted to.

This was the part of Yuki that intrigued me.

She thrust again. I knocked her naginata back with my kodachi.

Immediately after, a slicing blow from above.

I jumped back.

Two buttons flew off my shirt.

The gauze bandage on my cheek was ripped apart.

Because she had hit me on the shoulder, I couldn't control my left arm the way I would have liked to.

But I still stood.

"How...?" I heard Yuki mutter.

The scar on my cheek had split open again, and was beginning to bleed.

Yuki's expression was stone cold, but the tip of her naginata shook lightly.

I could tell that she was starting to have doubts.

"It's not like I haven't been in a fight before." I said.

I wasn't sure what she read from my words but she clutched the naginata closer to her body, shortening it's reach.

It appeared that she had decided to go for more control instead of weight.

"Why aren't you attacking?" she questioned.

Yuki was right. So far I hadn't even attempted to deal her a single blow.

I was putting all my concentration in defending myself, countering her attacks.

Yuki's naginata wasn't something I could survive if I received a direct hit.

That's why I kept a defensive stance, and waited for the perfect timing.

I slowly circled Yuki, never breaking eye contact.

I was beginning to understand the reach of her weapon.

From the corner of my eye I could see Kouhei sitting next to Mashiro, who was looking amused.

"Why are you smiling?" Yuki questioned.

I stopped in my tracks but didn't answer.

Yuki wasn't known for her patience. I knew my silence would only aggravate her.

She liked things straightforward, so if I behaved otherwise, I was certain she would crack eventually.

That was my moment.

"Touyama, how long has it been?" I asked, turning to her.

"What are you talking about?" she replied, confusion evident in her voice.

"I did say it wouldn't take long," I reminded her.

"Th-three minutes," Mizuho answered after checking the time on her cellphone.

"Really? I anticipated this would end in a minute," I said with a smirk.

"Am I supposed to take that as an insult?" Yuki snapped, a flash of anger in her eyes.

That was when she lost her cool.

And when I seized my chance.

"Catch!" I yelled as I tossed the kodachi in my left hand toward Yuki.

It obscured her view of me for a moment.

I snapped my left wrist again and threw what I had concealed in my palm towards Kouhei.

It was my house keys.

Kouhei reached out to catch them.

For a split second, everyone in the room was distracted by the silver object in the air.

"Ya-!" I swung my right arm up and, with all my might, flung the kodachi in my right hand towards Mashiro.

"Mother!!" Yuki yelled in panic.

That was her mistake.

I dashed forward, caught the first kodachi I had thrown, and charged toward her.

Yuki's face twisted in confusion.

But it was too late. There was no time. The distance between us had already closed.

She swung her naginata in desperation, hitting me in the ribs.

The impact knocked the breath out of me, but it wasn't enough to take me down.

She would have needed more momentum.

Her naginata was too long.

I lifted my hands up between us.

Leaning forward, I fell, putting all my weight on her.

At the same time, I kicked up her right leg, the one she was supporting herself on.

I heard her gasp. She lost her balance. I kept falling with her, and then...

Thud! We hit the floor together.

"Ugh!" Yuki choked from the impact.

But..



"Don't move."

With one hand pressing her down, I used the other hand to point the remaining kodachi towards her.

She stared at the wooden sword barely an inch away from her face.

After a moment, she went limp. Admitting defeat.

"Are you happy now?" I called out to Mashiro without taking my eyes away from Yuki.

I kept my position, just to be safe.

Mashiro seemed at a loss for words.

I noticed she had the other kodachi in her hand.

I had thrown it with all my force, but she had caught it without breaking her sitting posture.

I felt Yuki let out a breath.

She was slightly flushed, and her heart beat rapidly.

Wait, heartbeat?

"Boob."

"Huh?"

She started hiccupping, the way people do when they begin to panic.

"Hand."

I looked at my hand pressing her down.

It was on her breast, and had a pretty good grip on it too.

"Oh." I muttered.

No wonder I could sense her heart beating.

"N-..." she hiccupped.

Tears started welling up in her eyes.

"N?" I asked back.

"N-Noooooooooo!!!!!!" Yuki screamed.

She found her chance to retaliate.

"Ooof!!!" Receiving a blow on the cheek, I flew sideways off her, hitting the floor hard.

I saw stars. As my blurred vision adjusted, I took a moment to appreciate Yuki's ability to pack such a punch from ground position.

She slowly stood up, swaying like a drunk.

She made her way over to me.

I was still stunned, and wasn't quite thinking properly, but at the back of my mind I was thinking it probably wasn't such a bad situation if she was near me.

"You!! You!!" She stammered as sat on my chest.

She started punching me from above.

"How could you!! Even Shiro!! Was able!! To entice you!! But you didn't!! Even!! Notice!!"

Right hook, left hook, right jab, left jab, right, left, right, left, right, left.

I made sounds no human should with each blow.

"I know Towada women aren't voluptuous!! So what!! We get tubby easily too!! And we have small butts!! But I won't!! Stop punching you!! Until!! You!! Apologize!!"

"Stop!! He's gonna die!!" Kouhei jumped in and pulled us apart like a referee in a boxing match.

"H-h-he touched me!! Waaah!!!" Yuki began bawling her eyes out the moment she stopped her assault.

"So this is what Konno Masaki is truly like." Towada Mashiro laughed out loud, as if she was having too much fun.

"Masaki-san, really, you should have chosn a better time and place to perve." Mizuho sighed, somewhat disappointed at me.

"See, I knew Masaki-kun would win! Yay, I win!!" It appeared Sanae was betting on me.

I was going through a pretty serious ordeal, but everyone else was behaving like they had just enjoyed some good entertainment.

"You alright?" Kouhei asked, grinning down at me.

"Kinda," I replied.

And then I proceeded to black out.

As I passed out, I thought of Yuki.

I didn't feel too bad.

Melting snow

"I'm alive," I mumbled.

I was sitting in a bath in the Towada estate. It was as big as a public hot spring.

I scooped up some water with my hands and splashed my face.

The bruises hurt, but because Yuki was sitting in an awkward position above me, it seemed she wasn't able to inflict anything too serious.

It occurred to me that it probably wasn't the best idea to take a warm bath with all sorts of swelling, but it was too late to get out now.

"Fui-" I let out a funny sigh.

I leaned against the edge of the hinoki bath and looked up at the open window. Large snowflakes blew in from outside, but they soon dissolved as they floated through the steam.

I took a moment to listen to the faint whistle of the wind.

I stretched my legs out. Even if I stretched out my entire body, I wouldn't have been able to touch the other side of the bath.

The maid told me the entire bathroom was made of hinoki wood.

"What have I gotten myself into?" I muttered under my breath as I thought back on the recent events.

When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a private room lying on a futon.

The sun had gone down, and the roads were blocked because of a snowstorm.

The Towada estate was in a secluded area near the mountains, and it was difficult to get home through the snow.

It meant Kouhei and the others were stuck here as well.

Mashiro made preparations so we all could stay over for the night.

By the time I knew it, a phone call was made to the Konno residence telling my mom I would be staying over for the night.

When I was passed the receiver, she said:

"Have fun with your hanky-panky, kiddo!"

I slammed the phone down.

The maid took me to the living room, where everyone was having a dinner party.

It appeared Mashiro was squeezing all the information she could about me from my friends.

I didn't have much appetite but politely picked at the expensive food before me.

Halfway through dinner, Mashiro whispered in my ear:

"When am I going to be a grandmother?"

My head throbbed harder.

"I'm gonna sing next!" Sanae said.

They even began karaoke. I was exhausted and just wanted to get into a bath and go to sleep.

As my body warmed up, I became more aware of the bruises on my body.

They hurt, but at least I had satisfied Mashiro. It meant my family was safe for now.

As weird as my mom was, she's still my mom.

"I'm so tired," I mumbled for the umpteenth time.

The bath was heated just right, and I had been in it for far too long.

I began to feel drowsy, and my head was slowly clouding up.

It was about time I got out.

I stood up.

Then Yuki, garbed in a thin white kimono, barged in.

"Wh-!?" I choked, startled by her sudden appearance.

"I came to wash your back," she said nonchalantly.

"Noooo-!!!" I screamed like a girl.

"What are you doing in here?" I retreated into the bath, curled up so the water reached my chin.

"You're behaving weirdly. I already told you, I came to wash your back," she repeated, looking at me with confusion.

"You shouldn't just walk in when someone of the opposite sex is taking a bath," I protested.

"You aren't just someone, you're my boyfriend. Now come here so I can scrub your back," she insisted, stepping closer.

"I've already washed, thanks," I replied, trying to remain calm.

"It doesn't seem like the soap has been used." She raised an eyebrow at the dry bar of soap sitting by the shower.

"Is it that you don't like to wash? That's disgusting," she added with a look of disapproval.

"It's not that," I muttered, feeling a bit embarrassed.

"Then what is it?" she asked, still puzzled.

"What you're wearing."

"This? It's a handmade Juban from Kyoto."

"That's not what I meant."

Because of the steam, her Juban was getting damp, and it clung to her body.

"What are you upset about?" She pouted and started walking towards me in large strides.

"Hey! No! Don't come any closer! Please, don't look!"

"But I want to look. If you don't want me to come closer, you come closer to me."

"That makes no difference."

"What's the problem?"

"...I'm embarrassed."

"Hmm? Don't be. I've washed my father's back before, I know what to expect."

"But he's your father! He's family. I may be a guy, but I'm pretty sensitive about things like that!"

"You're family too. We could officially get married tomorrow if it eases your mind."

"Just... NO!" I protested as I pushed my palms out toward her in a gesture to stop.

She finally stopped marching towards me, and glared at me in silence for a while.

"That's a problem." She muttered.

"Why?" I asked.

"Mother and Mizuho told me I'm not allowed to let you out until I wash your back." She explained.

"Just ignore them."

"Kouhei said it was an easy way to excite you too, what did he mean by that?"

That idiot.

"You don't have to do anything."

"But... Achoo!" She sneezed. Then she sniffed and shivered.

Come to think of it, the window's wide open, and the wind was blowing in.

She must be cold.

"I'm not going to... Achoo! Go back until I finish my mission."

She put her hands on her hips with determination.

"Oh no..."

I was beginning to feel giddy from the heat of the bath but I couldn't stand up to get out of it, not now.

Reality is merciless. Again, it was shutting off every possible escape route I had.

"Achoo! I'm not- Achoo!"

I started to feel guilty making her stand in the cold.

Through my foggy, half-cooked brain, I tried to think of ways to warm her.

The windows weren't regular glass windows, but the traditional wooden ones. I couldn't shut them without making a display of myself.

There wasn't a heater in the room either.

"Oh!" Suddenly I had a stroke of genius, remembering why I was so warm.

"Why don't you get in the bath? - Huh?"

I suddenly realized what that meant.

Where was the bath?

That's where I was.

"Ooooh!!! No no no no!!!"

It was a practical solution, but probably not a morally correct one.

I had to quickly take that back!

"Yuki, forget what I said-"

"Wait a moment."

To my surprise, she turned around and left the room.

I stared at the door, left wide open, in disbelief.

She left? I thought she was so eager. Do I get out now? Why did she just... leave?

A moment later, I got my answer.

"Thanks for waiting." She came back with a wooden lacquered tray in her hands.

She had brought something to drink.



"Excuse me," she said, blushing as she stepped in.

And just like that, I went dumb.

She sank her body slowly into the bath. I watched the ripples on the water because I didn't know where to look. She chuckled and then

leaned against my left shoulder.

The wooden tray floated before us, rocking gently on the water.

"You're too close," I said.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"You can stay here, and I'll go to the corner over there," I suggested.

"You're being stupid," she replied.

I knew I was.

"I'm not going to keep myself away from you," she said as she poured a cup from the tokkuri she brought.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just cold water," she replied with a soft smile. "You looked like you needed it."

I slowly took the cup from her hands.

"A toast!" she exclaimed.

"To what?" I asked.

"To you, Masaki. You fought me, and you won," she explained.

I wasn't sure whether or not that was something to be proud of, but I touched my cup to hers and took a gulp anyway. I could feel the cool water spread through my heated body.

"Can I have another?" I asked.

"As much as you want," she answered.

She poured me another cup, and I drank it down quickly too. It felt good and refreshing. The dull, drowsy cloud lifted from my mind, and I felt invigorated.

As I regained my senses, I became more aware of the weird situation I was in. I could sense Yuki beside me, with her juban plastered to her skin. The material had turned slightly translucent, and it took all my effort to avert my eyes from her.

"Yuki, y-y-your, uh, see-th-th-" I stuttered.

"Seeth? What?" she asked.

"N-nothing," I muttered.

This was difficult.

We sat in the bath silently for a while.

"Until you, I had never lost to anybody other than my mother," she suddenly said. "I didn't go easy on you. I fought with all my might, and I lost."

It took me a while to register that she was talking about the fight we had that afternoon.

"That's because I tricked you. The same trick won't work twice," I replied.

"I know, but you never get second chances in battle," she said.

"Hmm..." I nodded, searching for words.

To be honest, I wasn't listening to what she was saying. I was hopelessly concentrating on the feeling of her body leaning against me.

"Forgive me," she said.

"What?" I asked. That caught my attention. Yuki often jumped from topic to topic, so I had to ask her again.

"You're bruised." She placed a palm gently on my cheek.

I wasn't sure whether the heat came from her hands or my face.

"I've been trained in hand-to-hand combat in a lying position before, but for some reason, I got scared," she admitted.

"I wouldn't have violated you there." I assured.

"Violate? It was a battle. We had already been violent to each other." she replied.

Oh yeah, I had forgotten Yuki had basically no knowledge about things in that area.

"So you instinctively punched me in the face. Understandable."

"Masaki, you're leaving me behind in the conversation."

"Well, I hope this means I've successfully got your mother off my back."

"Mother seems incredibly fond of you now."

"Is that so." I sighed and dropped my shoulders.

I may have just gotten myself deeper into trouble.

"Masaki..." She hesitated.

"You don't love me, do you?"

"No, I don't."

We've had this conversation so many times before.

"Then why are you dating me?"

"Because I think you're pretty, and have a hot body."

"You liar." She was quick to respond. "You're not the type that gets attracted to just a pretty face. You're hiding something."

"I'm not hiding anything," I said.

"Look at me." She took my chin and forced me to face her. "What is it about me that attracts you?"

"I can't quite figure you out. That's the reason," I admitted.

"That's the reason?" she asked, her tone skeptical.

"I think so," I replied.

"And once you think you can figure me out?" she pressed.

"I could easily leave you and run," I said bluntly.

"You're saying the truth," she murmured, studying my eyes intently.

"Then I guess I'll have to figure out a way to capture you so you can't escape." She laughed softly. "I wish I could just reach out and take you away."

I felt my heart skip a beat. I had an idea where this was going.

"Let's make a baby. A baby would give a good reason for us to stay together," she said suddenly.

"I knew you'd say that!" I exclaimed, startled.

"Please. I really want a child," she pleaded.

"Absolutely not!" I shot back.

"What do I have to do to make one?" she asked earnestly.

"Ask somebody else," I said, avoiding her gaze.

"That's so unfair, that you know and I don't," she said, frowning.

"Look it up on the internet," I suggested.

"I don't know how to use the internet. Besides, it has to be you that teaches me," she insisted.

"Why?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"I have to learn from you. You have to teach me, tell me what to do," she explained.

"Why?" I repeated.

"Because..." She looked away, blushing. "I don't think I'd want anybody else to know what I'm like for anything related to having a baby."

"Oh my god," I muttered, unable to look at her anymore. I scooped handfuls of water to splash my face in embarrassment.

Though she didn't know the specifics, she clearly understood it was something deeply intimate.

"Please, it has to be you," she said softly, lacing her hands with mine under the water.

"Well, there's this stork..." I said, attempting to stall.

"You're lying," she said flatly.

"Darn," I muttered.

So much for that option. Well, then-

"And don't start with the cabbage patch," she warned.

Now I can't use that option either.

"What do I have to do?" she asked again, her voice raised.

"You don't have to do anything," I replied.

She looked unconvinced, inching closer toward me.

"I said no!" I snapped, pinching the soft flesh of her cheeks.

"Wha-a-you-ooing? (What are you doing?)" she mumbled, her distorted words barely comprehensible.

I tugged on both sides, stretching her mouth wide. "I can't tell you the reason, but I can't teach you now. Okay?"

Yuki's skin was smooth and elastic, stretching to unbelievable limits. It was oddly fun.

"That hurts," she muttered, her voice taking on the peculiar clarity of a ventriloquist. I could hear her pronounce every word now.

"You're trying to steer me away from the topic. You sly fox," she accused, narrowing her eyes.

"I'm not being sly!" I protested. "You should call me Masaki 'Tender' Konno."

"Sanae told me," Yuki said, her voice laced with accusation.

"Whenever a man can't have his way in a conversation, he'll attempt to fix things physically."

Dammit, Sanae!

"You deserve to be pinched just as much as I do! Take that!" she exclaimed, grabbing my cheeks and pulling hard.

"Ow-owowowowow!" I cried, wincing in pain.

"Don't you want me at all?" she demanded, her tone rising with frustration. "I'm pleading with you, and you feel nothing!?"

"Will you ee-o-sensetif-to-a feelings? I won-wen-tu-yo fo-!! (Will you be more sensitive to my feelings? I won't bend to your force!)" I retorted, my words garbled through the tugging.

"Grrr!" she growled, her eyes narrowing in determination.

"Rrrr!" I shot back, matching her intensity.

We tugged at each other's cheeks, testing the limits. It was quickly turning into a ridiculous game of chicken.

And then the door flew open.

"Hi folks, thanks for joining us! This new program, 'Lovebirds of the day' will be brought to you by your favorite member of the Student Council, me, Mizuho Touyama, who was also ranked number one as 'The clumsiest drama queen' in your polls! Today we will introduce new and fascinating ways of making out in the bathroom! I will also be wearing a bathing suit for your visual enjoyment, and to maintain modesty within the rules of censorship on air. Now, what do we have here? Our fresh couple of today is making out by... huh?"

Yuki and I froze.

"What are you two doing?"

Sanae and Kouhei, also in bathing suits, peeked out from behind Mizuho.

"I knew they'd stay pure." Sanae said with an exaggerated shrug.

Me and Yuki were still in shock.

We couldn't move.

"You two look like... hmmm. To put it nicely, I'd say you two look like idiots."

That wasn't putting it nicely.

The three of them stared at us in the bath, and I felt another scream building up inside of me.

After that, we all sat in the bath together, though I really didn't feel it was fair that I was the only one stark naked.

The three of them kept chatting about all sorts of things and, as usual, teased us as much as they could.

I looked out the window and noticed it had almost stopped snowing.

"Safe for now." I muttered.

"I was this close." I heard Yuki mumble.

Party preparations

In the following weeks, I was on my toes, paying close attention to whatever Yuki said or did. To my surprise, the days passed peacefully.

Before I knew it, school was out for the winter holidays.

The Touyama siblings looked as though their souls had been beaten out of them for a few days after returning home with their report cards.

Sanae was busy helping at the eatery, as people flocked in for their end-of-year celebrations.

Occasionally, I would lend her a hand.

Since the holidays began, I hadn't seen Yuki even once. We'd exchange messages now and then about preparations for the New Year's party, but that was the extent of it.

Now it's December 30th, the day before the party.

"Everything is ready," I muttered to myself, checking the list on my cellphone one last time before slipping it back into my pocket.

I carried several large bags filled with dried seafood from the local shop. For a party with three young girls, it wasn't the most conventional choice for snacks. Strangely, though, Mizuho seemed completely at ease chewing on sticks of dried squid.

Kouhei was out at the market hunting for crabs. Sanae and Mizuho were in the kitchen cooking, while Yuki was off gathering other supplies with the help of Towada Trading.

I thought back to what happened around this time last year but quickly shook the thought from my head. It wasn't something I wanted to remember.

I never imagined I'd be out partying with friends during the holidays, and just thinking about it filled me with joy, adding a spring to my step.

I got home earlier than expected.

"I'm home," I called out.

"Welcome back, you playboy!" Mom's voice rang out.

I sighed, taking off my shoes. "Is someone here?" I asked, noticing two unfamiliar pairs by the front door. They certainly weren't mine, nor were they Mom's.

"Oh, Masaki-chan, stop that! You don't have to pretend with Mommy!" Mom's dramatic tone carried into the hallway as she teased me. "Making such an innocent face like that- and now you're four-timing behind my back? By next year, they'll be calling you 'Masaki, the round-the-clock stud'!"

Not really a title to be proud of.

"Who's here?"

"Hey! Don't ignore me like that, you're hurting mommy's feelings! Didn't you notice I just made a joke with 'timing' and 'clock'?"

Exasperated, I walked past mom up to my room to see for myself.

I knocked on the door, just in case.

"Wh-whoa!! This room is occupied!!" cried a familiar voice.

And then, a sudden cessation of the noise of things being moved around inside.

Then, finally, silence.

"C-come in!"

It was my room, so I thought it was weird having to be given permission to enter.

I opened the door.

"Hey!" Mizuho saluted me.

"Hi." Sanae bowed to me awkwardly.

"I just came back from shopping for the stuff you listed."

"Good job. Take a seat." Mizuho said.

"It's my room, you know." I reminded her.

I rolled my eyes and sat down on the floor.

"It's so nice that you have a hot carpet here. I was worried I'd get a really cold bottom!"

"We have to take care of our bottoms, don't we? Booty's important! Ooh-huu-huu!"

"So, what brings you here?"

"We wanted to double check with you the list of things to bring tomorrow." Sanae explained, pulling out a piece of paper.

It was a simple printed spread sheet that had a picture of a smiling dolphin on the side with a speech bubble that said: "How do I delete you".

"Just us? What about Kouhei, and Yuki?"

"Yuki's a princess. She won't have the muscle to carry heavy things!" Sanae explained.

I have bruises that beg to differ.

"And we put Onii-chan on a ship to go catch crabs since the market was out of stock."

"Wait a minute, say that again?"

"Hmm? We put Onii-chan on a ship to go catch crabs."

I closed my eyes and thought hard.

"You see, this year's catch wasn't so great, so we asked Yuki if she could arrange to put him on one of Towada's fishing boats to go get some of our own."

"Um... if I'm not mistaken, fishing for crabs takes just as long as fishing for Tuna. I think it takes months before they return to land." I explained frantically.

We all looked at each other.

"Err, well, I guess we'll have to give up on the crabs then. At least Onii-chan will come back a strong fisherman." Mizuhou said jokingly.

"Okay, so Kouhei will be absent from the party tomorrow. Too bad!"

They laughed it off, but I'm really starting to worry about Kouhei now.

"Well, let's calculate how much we have to bring up tomorrow then. We can deduct Kouhei's amount."

"Please add him in, this is too serious to be a joke!"

We looked through the list together, but there weren't many changes to be made.

It was something we had gone over weeks beforehand, and it was planned very well.

"Okay, I'll bring the pot from my place." Sanae drew a red circle on the spread sheet. "And you put it in my bag when we get to the station, right?"

"Last year we only had Onii-chan to help with the heavy stuff. This year, it's going to be so much easier with you... no wait, I forgot, Onii-chan isn't going to make it."

"Please don't say that Mizuho-san! For crying out loud, he's your brother!"

Again, they laughed it off.

"You guys, really... but, I just realized something. If you'd come just to run a checklist, wouldn't an email have sufficed?"

"Hmm? aren't you happy to see us?" Sanae asked.

"I just don't appreciate you giving my mom weird fantasies." I explained.

"You're too serious. You don't even own any porn." Mizuho complained.

And now I understood what they were doing in my room.

"Sorry to disappoint you." I managed to reply coolly.

That's because I knew my secret stash was hidden outside at the back of the garage.

"So boring. I'm going home." Mizuho huffed.

"Take care."

I saw them to the door, and with a quick conversation about what time we would meet up tomorrow, we said our goodbyes.

"See you tomorrow!" They left together, walking side by side.

After I closed door, mom asked me to help with the end of year cleaning.

Of course, I insisted I would do the garage.

That night, I tried calling Kouhei. Surprisingly it connected.

"Masaki, is that you!?" I could hear him yelling through the commotion in the background.

"Kouhei, where are you now? What's happening?"

"Dammit! Pirates!! They're attacking our ship, but don't worry! I got the crabs, I'll protect-"

With a crackle and a beep, the line cut off.

I stared at my cellphone for a few moments.

"Oh well." I ducked under the blankets and fell asleep.

Celebration

7:00pm on the 31st of December.

Yuki, Kouhei, Mizuho, Sanae, and I made our way up the mountain for our party.

A thick layer of snow blanketed the ground, just as we'd expected. Kouhei led the way, packing the snow down with each step.

We followed in his footsteps, and when he grew tired, I took over as he directed me which way to go.

"Your turn," he said, passing me the torchlight. I took his place at the lead.

Unlike the hills near the city, the Tagami mountains had no electricity. The path was engulfed in darkness.

Kouhei carried heavier loads and walked faster than me, but his breathing only grew slightly heavier. I, on the other hand, was panting hard.

I refused to complain, it was our job after all. Beyond that, there was some unspoken drive within me, pushing me to prove my masculinity. So, I pressed forward in silence, stamping the snow down as I led.

"This is SO heavy! TOO heavy!" Mizuho groaned, voicing what we'd been enduring for a while now.

"You've got the lightest load, quit whining." Kouhei snapped.

"Do you need to rest?" I suggested, secretly hoping for a break myself.

"Vegetables are heavier than you think! I'm starting to hate cabbages!" Mizuho moaned.

"Want to trade loads with me? I'm carrying five cartons of drinks," Yuki offered.

"Why don't you be the big brother here, Kouhei, and help your little sister out?" Sanae quipped.

"You want me to carry even more when I'm already carrying twice what each of you has? Sanae, you've got the lightest load. Why don't you pitch in?" Kouhei retorted.

"Sure, no problem! As long as you don't mind live crabs crawling on your back," Sanae replied.

"Why didn't you boil them first? Isn't it uncomfortable?" Mizuho asked.

"Nah, I'm okay. I'm pretty tough like that. I've always managed uncomfortable positions!"

"Uncomfortable positions...!!!" I squeaked.

"Why do you always react to words like that? It's almost reflexive with you." Yuki scolded.

Behind me they made a line, with Mizuho right behind me, then Yuki, then Sanae, and lastly Kouhei.

"It's only another five minutes." Kouhei encouraged.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"By the way the path slopes and the position of the trees. Give it a couple of years and you'll be able to tell too." Kouhei replied.

I looked around, flashing the torchlight among the trees in hopes of locating a familiar landmark.

"Five minutes, huh?" I muttered as I looked up.

Because of the thick branches above us, the mountains felt darker than the night.

"We should hurry."

"I'm gonna die!! I can't walk anymore!"

"Come on." I held out my right hand to Mizuho.

"Uh, nice to meet you?" she said hesitantly.

"No, not a handshake. Pass me your things," I clarified.

"Huh?"

"If it's just five minutes, I can handle it," I assured her.

"But you're already carrying the pots and the gas," she said.

"It's tougher to stop and wait with all this baggage. Hurry up."

"Oh, thanks!" Mizuho handed over the rucksack she was carrying.

"Urgh." As soon as she dropped it into my hand, my arm sagged under the weight. I thought my shoulder might give out.

"Uh, I-I'll carry it after all!" she stammered, reaching for the bag.

"It's alright. Let's go," I said, forcing a strained smile.

I turned around and swung the backpack over one shoulder. I was glad it was dark so they couldn't see me gritting my teeth.

"Masaki-san?... Um..." Mizuho's hesitant voice broke the silence behind me.

"What is it?" I asked, my tone sharper than intended.

Though I wanted to conserve my energy for carrying all the bags, I managed to respond.

"I..." Before she could finish that thought, Kouhei interrupted.

"Masaki! I'm not going to let you marry my little sister, if that's what you're after!"

"Kouhei, I'm never going to ask for her hand. Relax."

Somehow the conversation was familiar to me.

"Now, what were you about to say Mizuho?"

"Nothing..." She said glumly.

"Well actually, I was going to say I wouldn't mind marrying you since you were so kind to carry my stuff."

"WHAT!?" Kouhei and I were dumbfounded.

"Mizuho, do you mean to say you're waging a war against me? If so, be prepared to fight to the death." Yuki said, glaring at Mizuho.

"Uh, haha, hell no. You be the wife, I'll just be the mistress." Mizuho joked.

"Oh? Well that's an interesting turn. I never expected that from you. Okay! I'll be 'the other woman' then, Mistress number two." Sanae added.

"Hey! Don't I get a say in this?" I exclaimed.

"Don't tell me you're unhappy with an arrangement like that?" Sanae asked with a chuckle.

How did she expect me to answer that question?

"Masaki, don't tell me you're actually considering it."

I decided not to say anything to avoid a horrific death.

"N-no comment..." I said meekly.

"Hey, I wouldn't mind having a mistress!" Kouhei volunteered.

"No way." Yuki replied.

"You couldn't even find a wife, let alone a mistress." Mizuho added.

"Mm, Kouhei, actually I don't think you should reproduce for the good of mankind!" Sanae grilled him the hardest.

"I need more appreciation!" Kouhei whined.

I tilted my head in thought as I walked.

Kouhei was so much more of a decent guy than I was, I found it weird that he wasn't in my position.

If I were a girl I'd definitely choose him over me.

Funny enough, while we chatted, the weight of our baggage didn't seem so bad.

And just as Kouhei had said, we got to the shrine in five minutes.

The inside of the shrine wasn't very big. In fact it might have been smaller than my room, which was only the size of six tatami mats.

"Mizuho, aren't you putting in too much kelp stock?" Yuki asked.

We had laid out a stiff mat, with the portable gas range placed directly on top of it.

A clay pot filled with mineral water was already bubbling away.

"This is just right! The best broth is the kind where you can actually taste the kelp in it," Mizuho insisted.

"But Kouhei brought back fresh crabs for us," Yuki pointed out. "He said the fishermen told him never to cook the crabs in anything too salty, or it'll overpower their taste."

"Oh, Yuki, you're actually taking Onii-chan's opinion seriously?" Mizuho teased.

"No, I'm taking the crabs seriously," Yuki retorted.

"Point taken," Mizuho said with a grin. "I guess we should show some appreciation until we've finished eating the crabs."

And how would Kouhei be treated after they finished the crabs I wondered.

I silently apologized to Kouhei for not sticking up for him more. These girls were scary.

"Hey, move your hands, do some work!" Kouhei said as he nudged me with an elbow.

For his sake, I hoped he hadn't overheard the conversation the girls just had.

Next to him, Sanae was unpacking the food she had brought from home.

"At least they said they would show some appreciation." Kouhei smiled. He was generous.

I could hear the girls chopping vegetables as I pasted cling film over the holes of the old Shoji doors to keep out the cold.

"Wow, talk about showing respect," I murmured to myself. When I looked closely, I could tell that the cling film method had been used many times before from all of the old cello tape marks. This was supposed to be the house of a god, but no one had come in to mend the doors properly.

"Hey, Kouhei," I called out, glancing toward him.

"What? ... Hey, hurry up, it's cold," he replied curtly, wrapping himself tighter in his jacket.

"Do you guys have Hatsumode here?" I asked.

"Not in this town," he explained, shaking his head. "We all go to the temple on the borders of the next town, where there's a far bigger shrine. Besides..."

"Besides?" I prompted, leaning forward slightly.

"With a god that goes around demanding ice cream from all the households," Kouhei said, smirking, "I don't think the people around here find it necessary to go pay our respects."

"Ah," I muttered, a wry smile playing on my lips. That explained everything.

I looked to the center of the shrine, where a wolf skin hung from the ceiling. Strangely, it looked clean despite it being hundreds of years old. The sheen on the wolf skin reminded me of Shiromaru's glossy white coat. Since this was the house of a goddess, it occurred to me, this place was probably-

"You thinking about Shiro-sama?" Kouhei interrupted, his voice cutting through my thoughts.

I must have reacted awkwardly because Kouhei's smile deepened.

"Well, you did touch her boobs," he said with a mischievous grin. "I bet you'd be in a sticky situation if she decided to come home tonight."

"Kouhei..." From his smug expression, I could tell he had done something about it.

"It took five tubs of ice cream. Big tubs. She promised she would stay in town while we're up here. She's at my place now, pigging out."

"I see." Shiro never lied. I let out a sigh of relief.

I felt an immense amount of gratitude towards my friend.

"Come on, let's finish this." He pushed my shoulder, and I continued mending the holes with cling film.

"Mmm! Grr!!" I heard Sanae grumble. She was jumping with a piece of cling film spread out in her hands, trying to reach a hole near the ceiling.

It was an impossible mission though, because to reach it she needed to jump another foot higher.

"I'll do it." Kouhei sighed.

"No! I said I'd do the right half, so I'm going to do the right half!"

"But you can't reach."

"I know! I drank so much milk, but I didn't grow any taller!"

"You're already taller than most girls. Here," Kouhei grabbed her waist and lifted her up.

"Woo-hoo!" Sanae seemed to be enjoying herself

"Hey, I think you've put on some weight again."

"No way! Don't lie about that Kouhei!"

"I'm not lying. When it comes to you, I can sense every bit of change like a sushi master knows how much rice he's got in his hand."

"Milligrams don't count!"

"Just hurry up and finish!"

I stopped to watch their banter.

Sanae pasted the last of the cling film she had on the hole, and Kouhei gently put her down on the floor.

"That's it!... Masaki, are you still at it?" Kouhei

"Kouhei, I think you should stay just the way you are."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I started mending the holes again.

He pressed me for an explanation a few times but I brushed him off, and we started kidding around.

I noticed Sanae watching us with a smile on her face.

Some time later, Mizuho entered the room shivering.

To go to the toilet, she had to go out and walk along the open corridor. Her hair was covered in snow.

"Come and have a hot drink to warm yourself up." Sanae beckoned to Mizuho to sit beside her.

We were all sitting around the clay pot of soup we had made.

"There you go," she said, handing over the cup.

"Oh, that feels so much better," Mizuho whispered, her shoulders relaxing as she sipped.

We had another portable gas range brought solely for hot water, so we could make hot drinks.

The two of them behaved like old women, huddled up close together sipping on tea with rounded backs.

"Attention please!" Kouhei raised himself to his knees. "Now that the dreaded day of getting our grades back is over, we can now enjoy the New Year with free spirits."

"It was only dreadful for you Touyama siblings." Yuki scolded.

".....I got strangled." Mizuho cried.

".....Mine almost got crushed." Kouhei said with a shudder.

We were compassionate enough not to ask what, exactly, almost got crushed.

"It was so scary!!" they said in unison.

"Oh, there, there, it couldn't have been that bad." Sanae consoled.

"You wouldn't understand because you're a winner!"

If being a winner means getting an all average report card.

"Let's not talk about dark things today."

"Y-yeah, no point crying over the past, right?" Mizuho seemed almost desperate to forget whatever happened.

"A-anyway, I, Kouhei Touyama, would like us all to make a toast."

"To what?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious? For us all having passed the last year safely, and..."

They all turned to look at me.

"...for having you, Masaki, as our new friend in the group."

I didn't know what to say.

"Oh? Are you moved, Masaki?" Sanae teased.

"Well, yeah."

"Whoa, I didn't expect you to admit that!" Mizuho remarked.

Kouhei patted me on the shoulder.

Sanae smiled warmly.

Mizuho glanced at the crab meat on the table.

Yuki leaned gently against me.

"So, ladies and gentlemen..." Kouhei began.

"To Masaki!" they cheered as we raised our cups.

Amidst the sound of clinking glasses, I spoke with all sincerity,

"Thank you."



"-And then, when the pirates came on board I took them on one by one Asian Kung fu style..." Kouhei was spinning tales of his fishing ventures.

"Nom nom nom nom nom nom!!" Mizuho devoured the crab meat like there was no tomorrow.

"Anybody want more tea?" Sanae was brewing another pot.

"And then the pirate captain came, and man, he was a big guy! And he used flying kicks too!"

"So that's the wire-fu action part. Kouhei, can you pass that cup to me?" Sanae asked.

"...There you go. And then, of course, I finished him off with a mean right hook! I said 'See you in your next life!' over my shoulder, real suave. The point of the story is, it took a lot of trouble to get that crab meat! You better revere it!!" Kouhei concluded.

"Kouhei, here's your tea. Hey, the fire's starting to die." Sanae said.

"Well, we only use it once a year, it's not like we replenish the gas often... Hey!! That's my share of crab!!" Kouhei pleaded to his sister, only to be ignored.

"Oi! Don't ignore me! Give it back! I'll have to teach you some mann-OW-ow-ow-ow-ow!!! Don't stab me with it's pincers!! Ow, that's my head!!"

Mizuho's gluttony surpassed any care she had for her brother.

That was the other side of the table, on this side...

"Do you know you're a crucial part of me?" Yuki's voice carried a mix of frustration and longing. "I need a certain amount of Masaki each day to function properly, and after school ended you never even asked me out once! I'm not even good at using technology, yet I bought a cellphone and you didn't even ask me for my number! What? You didn't think I had gotten it for you? You should feel it from the love I emit from my body and... are you listening to me?"

We haven't even had a baby yet, and I already feel like I'm married.

"I want more tea." She crossed her arms, her tone unwavering.

"Yes, ma'am." I decided to be entirely submissive to her for the rest of the night.

Yuki narrowed her eyes. "Were you paying attention? Were you trying to make a point that you didn't want me anymore?"

"It's my first winter here, I was busy," I explained.

"Busy going to Kouhei's house to roll around and read comic books? Going to Sanae's to make extra cash? Too busy to talk to me because you were playing computer games all night?" Her accusations came rapid-fire.

I blinked. "How do you know all that!?"

"Mommy-chan tells me everything."

I rolled my eyes. Was she pronouncing my mom's name differently?
The hidden implications were unsettling.

Wait, Mom tells her everything? What the hell!?

"Are you listening!?" Yuki snapped.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't you have anything to say?"

"Sorry, ma'am."

Her sigh was sharp, cutting through the charged atmosphere. "I just want to know why you're avoiding me."

I didn't answer that. Instead, I exhaled heavily.

"Are you doing it because of the issue of having a baby?" Yuki asked.

And yes, that was exactly the reason.

"Why don't you just say so?"

Because I don't want to die just yet.

I shot a glance at Kouhei, silently pleading for help.

He caught my expression and merely stuck his thumb up at me, wishing me luck.

I had no allies.

I felt the end of the world approaching.

"I know you don't love me, Masaki. I know that." Yuki's voice softened, though her words hit hard. "But I can't stop myself from falling for you, even though it only makes things harder for me. Do you even know how that feels? What is it that's not enough for you? Or rather, what is it that you want from a woman? Is it her body? Do you need someone with bigger breasts? Or is it the fact that I don't know enough about having a baby, and that's putting you off? Yeah, maybe that's it. But why not think about it this way: you could teach me whatever you want, whatever pleases you, and I wouldn't know any better! Or is even that not enough? Yeah, it probably isn't."

She fired accusations and jumped to conclusions all at once.

Nothing I said would convince her otherwise.

So, I focused on my food.

Or rather, there was nothing else I could think of doing.

"She's basically saying he could get laid and he's not budging! Is he trying to be Masaki 'Gentleman' Konno?" Mizuho asked.

"Mm, no, I think he's being Masaki 'Chicken heart' Konno," Sanae remarked.

"Nah, what you're seeing is Masaki 'Eunuch' Konno, ladies." Kouhei quipped.

"I heard that!" I shot back.

Yuki leaned against me, her voice softer. "Masaki."

The collar of her kimono had loosened, revealing the smooth white skin of her collarbones.

"Your cup's empty." she said.

"Uh, yeah." My reply was automatic.

I poured myself another cup of tea, but my focus had completely shifted now that I noticed her kimono had loosened somewhat.

"Drink up." Her voice was gentle.

"Yeah."

"There's still a lot of food left, eat up!" Sanae suddenly interrupted, spooning more food onto our plates.

Yuki growled. "Sanae, are you purposely disturbing us?"

"No, of course not! I just came over to give this to you." Sanae handed Yuki a paper bag from the local bookshop. "I promised to give you this."

"No, I don't think I asked for anything-" Yuki hesitated.

"It was just a very long time ago, you must have forgotten!" Sanae smiled.

"Is that so? Well, thank you." Yuki accepted the bag reluctantly.

"Open it later!"

Kouhei snickered. "Oooh, Sanae, don't tell me you've just given her some steamy books to read!"

"Kouhei-kun, you're so dirty-minded." Sanae rolled her eyes.

"Onii-chan, you're a filthy piece of scum." Mizuho chimed in.

"I was only teasing!" Kouhei protested.

Yuki turned back to me. "Never mind them."

"I can't eat properly if you lean on me like that."

She didn't budge. "I'm having my share of Masaki for the day, so I'm not going to stop."

"Is that so?" I muttered as I took a bite of crab.

Unfortunately, I couldn't taste it properly. My senses were on overdrive with Yuki leaning on my shoulder.

"Only four hours to go until the year ends!" Kouhei announced, reaching out with his chopsticks.

Instead of the stewed vegetables and seafood, the clay pot was now filled with noodles in the leftover broth.

Sanae had prepared it the way she ate it at home, with Yuzu-kosho.

The recipe was meant for Udon noodles, but since it was the end of the year, we used soba noodles instead.

"This is really good," I commented.

Sanae smirked. "Doesn't that make you eager to have me as mistress number three?"

My eyes widened. "You're serious about that!?"

She laughed, covering her mouth. "No, not one bit."

The Touyama siblings ate their noodles in peace for once. As they reached for the Yuzu-kosho at the exact same time, we had to laugh at the similarities.

Sanae smiled warmly. "Let's do this again next year."

I mouthed the words silently. "Next year."

Next year, all of us except for Mizuho would be in our last year of high school.

We would all have to make big decisions.

Would we further our studies, or start working?

Would we still have time for each other?

What would Kouhei, Mizuho, and Sanae choose to do?

And then there was that question.

What about me and Yuki?

Me and Shiro.

Where would we be?

What would we do?

Would we really be able to stay together until the end of next year?

The mere thought of it made me hold my breath.

"Masaki-kun!" Sanae exclaimed, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Sorry?" I blinked, shaken.

"You looked really scared for a minute," she whispered, studying my face.

"Um..." I tried to explain what I was thinking about, but the words wouldn't come.

But then...

"Everything will be alright," she said.

I looked up, confused. "Huh?"

Sanae's eyes met mine. "It's us. Everything will be alright," she repeated.

"We will be alright."

And just like that, the weight of my worries faded away.

"Yeah," I murmured. Her words, slow and steady, brimmed with hope. I let myself bask in it.

A part of me told me I was being too optimistic.

Maybe I was, but I couldn't help asking myself again.

Will we be here, together again next year?

Yes.

Yes, we will.

I decided it right then and there.

"Are you alright, Masaki-kun?" Sanae asked, her voice softer now.

"If that's what you want me to be," I said, forcing a smile.

"I do," she answered simply, glancing at her wristwatch.

"Is it time for dessert? We've got ice cream outside! I'll go get it!" Mizuho announced, springing to her feet.

"Whoa!" she cried as a strong gust of wind rushed in the moment she flung open the door.

And then...

"Help!" She came back empty handed.

"What's wrong?" Kouhei asked.

"It's under all that snow, I need help digging it out."

"For real?"

"Come on, help! It's gourmet ice-cream!"

"I'll help too!" Sanae stood up and followed Kouhei.

"No, I'll go." I insisted.

"Nah, you just stay there." Kouhei said.

"But..."

"Your princess won't appreciate your moving now."

Yuki had fallen asleep on my shoulder.

"See you later,"

They left the room.

All I could hear was the leftover noodles sputtering on the gas range and Yuki's soft snoring by my ear.

With nothing else to do, I used my free arm to turn down the gas and scooped up the leftover food from the pot.

I proceeded to finish everything because the more leftovers we had, the more rubbish we had to carry away later.

I somehow managed to clean out the pot.

"Boy, they're taking time."

Five minutes had passed.

I thought for a moment.

"Yuki." I tapped her lightly on the cheek.

"Hmmm? You want a son?"

"I'd prefer a daughter. Wake up!"

I kept tapping until she finally opened her sleepy eyes.

"The three of them are taking too much time."

"Let's go find them." Yuki said as she swiftly got up.

You never could be sure what was out there in the dark.

We opened the door, bracing ourselves for the cold.

"Kouhei!" I shouted.

"Sanae! Mizuho! Where are you?" Yuki yelled.

The dark absorbed our voices.

Some snow fell from the branches above us, shaken by the vibration of our voices.

The three of them could be buried in snow somewhere if they weren't careful.

I listened for the sound of any movement.

"Masaki." Yuki beckoned to me as she squatted on the ground.

"Look."

She pointed at the area behind the offering box of the shrine. "It's the ice-cream box Mizuho went to get."

It was a simple cardboard box wrapped in plastic film.

It wasn't buried in the snow at all, it was just sitting there.

There was a piece of paper stuck underneath the box.

I pulled it out and opened it.

It was a note from Kohei.

I read it.

"Damn it, those guys." I muttered, exasperated.

"What does it say?"

I pressed the note into Yuki's hand as I pulled out a penlight I had in my pocket.

I searched the ground for any visible signs of them.

And there it was.

"We've been abandoned?"

I couldn't even nod from the incredulity of it all.

I just stared at the three tracks of footsteps trailing down and away.

Stranded

On the road from Tagami shrine.

"Five minutes are up," Mizuho declared, looking up from her cellphone.

"I hope Masaki's doing what he's supposed to," Kouhei said.

"Nah, he's Masaki 'Chicken-heart' Konno! I'm sure he'll need more time," Sanae replied.

"But he didn't come running after us with Yuki, so I guess that means he doesn't mind being alone with her," Mizuho observed.

"He's probably trying his best to ward off her advances right now," Kouhei added.

"Probably," Sanae nodded.

The three continued descending the mountain, occasionally glancing back toward the shrine.

It wasn't much of a plan.

They had decided to leave the two alone under the excuse of getting ice cream.

Later, Masaki and Yuki would find the note and realize they'd been intentionally left alone to have some private time.

However, Kouhei knew the plan had a couple of flaws.

"Aww, I wish we could see what's happening right now! It would be hilarious!" Sanae whined.

The first flaw: they couldn't stay behind and laugh their heads off at Masaki's discomfort.

"Isn't it weird that we're more worried about the guy doing nothing at all in this situation?" Kouhei mused.

The second flaw: the success of the plan depended entirely on Masaki.

The three walked in silence for a while.

"Uh... It's almost the New Year!" Mizuho said.

"Y-yeah, let's all go to Hatsumode together," Kouhei suggested.

"Sounds like a plan to me!" Sanae agreed.

"...Hey." Mizuho muttered.

"...Yeah." Kouhei nodded.

"Oh no..." Sanae yelped.

The less they spoke, the faster they walked.

Experience told them that, with only a flashlight in hand, rushing down the mountainside was dangerous.

Still, they couldn't help but move as quickly as possible.

"This..." Sanae used her arms to shield her face from the beating wind.

"Onii-chan!" Mizuho called out.

"This is bad," Kouhei said, his mouth twisting into a scowl.

Mizuho and Sanae tightened their scarves.

"You did check the weather report, didn't you?" Mizuho asked.

"It was supposed to be clear for a week," Kouhei replied.

"But it certainly doesn't look that way!" Sanae added.

The glow of the town lights seemed so much farther away now. It was getting harder to see through the whirling snow.

They squinted, but it made no difference.

"Onii-chan..." Mizuho yelled.

"Kouhei-kun..." Sanae shouted.

Kouhei scoured the area quickly, picking out familiar landmarks to gauge how far they were from the bottom.

"Another five minutes," he said with certainty. Partly to reassure the girls that everything was under control, and partly to reassure himself.

They walked the curving path, hands on the rocks to guide them.

Halfway down the mountain, the weather shifted.

That's when they began chatting about all sorts of silly things, trying to take their minds off the danger.

They were too afraid to admit what they knew was coming.

"It's a straight road from here. No cliffs, just flat ground," Kouhei said as he pushed through the snow. "From here, we can just make a run for it."

Kouhei realized he must have looked desperate by the way Sanae held her breath when he turned around.

"We don't have much time," Kouhei said.

"O-okay," Mizuho replied. "You go first, and I'll follow. Run!"

It was a stupid thing to do, running through the snow in the dark. But it was a fight against time now, and they had no other choice.

Mizuho sprinted, snow spraying upward with every pounding step she took. Being the fastest runner in school, she easily left the two behind.

"Sanae!" Kouhei shouted, glancing over his shoulder.

"I can't, it's too dark!" she said slowly, her head down, but Kouhei could hear the fear in her voice.

"We can't afford to lose any more time! We're in danger!"

"But, but..." She looked up, and Kouhei saw her face was streaked with frozen tears.

Kouhei tried to stop her from saying anything further, but-

"What's going to happen to Yuki and Masaki-kun?"

There. It was out now.

She had just spoken the fear they had been trying to ignore.

It took effort just to stand still.

They had always been taught that mountain weather was fickle, but even Kouhei who had lived in Tagami all his life had only experienced a blizzard like this a handful of times.

"It was me, I th-thought of the s-s-stupid plan. If I h-hadn't said anything, if Yuki and M-Masaki-kun..." Her choked words reached him even through the howling wind.

"W-what, what if they both... d-d-..."

Kouhei clenched his fists. He couldn't let her spiral.

"We're going to run now, together. We aren't going to stop until we reach the bottom. You hear me?"

"Kouhei, this hurts!" Sanae stared at Kouhei's large hand, which engulfed her own in a tight grip.

"If I go too fast, pull my hand. You only have to run or pull my hand. It's that easy, okay?" Kouhei said.

"B-but!" Sanae stuttered.

"The faster we reach town, the faster we can save Yuki and Masaki."

She hesitated, then whispered-

"...I promised."

Kouhei softened slightly. "Sanae?" He forced himself to stop and listen.

"I promised Masaki-kun that we'd all be together again next year!"

She was shaking.

Mizuho may have already made it down the mountain.

But Kouhei stood there, listening to a frightened girl.

"Is that what this is all about? Keeping a promise?" He grinned.

"It's not just... I-it's an important promise!!"

"Everything is going to be okay."

Sanae looked up.

"It's us. Everything is going to be okay."

They were the same words she had used to erase Masaki's fear.

And now, those same words from Kouhei erased hers.

"Can you run?"

"Your hand..."

"Yeah?"

"Don't let go of me."

"I won't. Let's go!"

Sanae nodded and ran, hand-in-hand with Kouhei.

He was hard to keep up with, and she easily ran out of breath.

Whenever she was about to pull his hand to tell him to stop, that she couldn't run any faster, he would slow down just in time to help her recover.

And then they would start running again.

They were probably moving at a speed barely faster than a brisk walk.

But even so, as long as she had Kouhei's hand in hers, Sanae knew that she could make it through.

Mizuho was waiting at the bottom, her cellphone pressed to her ear.

It was a relief to see the asphalt roads again.

They were still covered in snow, but it wasn't half as bad as the mountain path.

"I'm not getting any service!" she exclaimed, frustration creeping into her voice.

Tagami always had a weak signal for cellphones, and things were only worse because the lines were congested with people making preparations for the New Year.

Kouhei took a moment to catch his breath before speaking. "The closest house here is Grandpa Tagami's. You take Sanae with you and head there. Ask for help to call the ambulance, police, fire brigade, whatever help you can find. Tell them Towada's daughter is in trouble, and you'll get them moving faster."

Mizuho tightened her grip on the phone. "And then?" she asked hesitantly.

"Stay warm," Kouhei instructed.

Mizuho's breath hitched. "W-what about you!?"

"I'm going to get everyone around here up," Kouhei said firmly. "While you're handling the emergency services, we'll need all the help we can get to clear the path to the shrine."

"But you're tired too!" Sanae pointed out, concern evident in her voice.

Kouhei shook his head. "I'll be fine!"

Without another word, he broke into a full sprint and vanished into the blizzard, leaving the two alone.

Mizuho swallowed hard before turning to Sanae. "We've got to move too."

"Y-yeah," Sanae stammered, forcing herself to push forward.

Grandpa Tagami's house was just a few minutes away.

"Dammit, get through won't you!?"

Mizuho pressed the re-dial button on her phone nonetheless.

"Mizuho?"

"It keeps beeping at me!"

"I think you might have the wrong number."

"No way!"

Meanwhile, back at the shrine.

I was reading the rest of the note.

"Show us you're the man!! - Kouhei"

"Come on, chicken. Just do it. - Mizuho"

"I believe your real name is Masaki Da-Beast Konno. Don't let me down. - Sanae"

"You're going to get rich, kiddo! - Mommy"

"Take good care of my daughter. Should you disappoint me, I will make your life a living hell using all the power Towada has. Just some friendly advice: my daughter is particularly sensitive around the neck and ears... (and the list goes on and on to the back of the paper.) - Mashiro Towada"

I crushed the note in my hand.

We'd been had.

"What do they want us to do?"

Yuki seemed clueless.

There was a fizzling noise coming from the portable gas range.

It was running out of gas.

I turned it down.

"It's getting pretty cold." Yuki said, but I wasn't listening.

At that moment, I wanted to clasp my head in both hands and scream.

I had no way out.

I glanced at Yuki, who was warming her hands in the leftover heat over the gas range.

Her every movement caught my eye. I realized I was being hypersensitive to whatever she did.

It was just me and her, alone.

With everybody gone, it was hard to create a barricade between us.

I silently drained my cup.

But no matter how fast I drank, it wouldn't warm me up from the cold.

Wait, cold?

I looked up.

At the same moment, Yuki glanced at me. Her expression was tense.

"Something's wrong," she murmured.

Bang!

The cling film we had used to mend the hole in the doors was blown away, and large snowflakes whirled into the room. The doors rattled violently, the wind shrieking as it clawed to get inside.

"It's a blizzard!" I exclaimed.

The cold air devoured every trace of warmth. I gritted my teeth and stood up, clutching the roll of cling film and cello tape in my hands.

I tried to seal the holes, but the wind was too strong. Every attempt was futile; the film flapped wildly, refusing to press against the surface.

Peering outside, I saw nothing but darkness.

"We're trapped in here," I said under my breath.

It was surreal, but I couldn't afford to dwell on that. If I didn't get a grip, we would freeze to death.

I forced myself to think.

Do we try to escape? Or do we wait for rescue?

We still had our strength. We could brave the storm, descend the mountain-

"It's freezing," Yuki whispered, her voice trembling.

I turned. She was clutching herself, shivering violently.

She had always been tougher than most when it came to the cold, only ever carrying a simple throw-on as usual.

I swallowed hard.

"Let's wait for rescue," I said.

It seemed like the better choice.

I tried taping the cling film over the doors again, but it wouldn't hold. The cold had stripped the adhesive of its grip.

"Masaki..." Yuki's voice was barely audible now. "I'm cold."

I wrapped the leftover cling film around her, pulling it as tightly as I could. "I've heard this will help with insulation," I murmured.

Yuki looked up at me, her breath shallow. "Then you should have some on too."

"There isn't enough," I said, placing the empty roll on the floor.

It would probably have been more effective if it were wrapped directly against her skin, but considering the body heat that would be lost taking off her clothes, the best I could do was wrap it around her kimono.

"Is that better?" I asked.

She hesitated before nodding. "I think so."

Even if it wasn't much, it was better than nothing.

I sat down next to her and lifted the mat from the floor in an attempt to make us a makeshift blanket. It was too stiff to serve as a proper cover, but at least it created some barrier against the wind.

Strangely, the area around the altar felt warmer than the rest of the room.

"Perhaps it's divine protection?" I muttered, half to myself.

Yuki gave a faint smile. "It can't be too reliable then."

She spoke less and less as time passed. Perhaps she was trying to conserve her energy. Perhaps she was already too weak. Maybe both.

I wasn't any better.

She mumbled something under her breath, barely a sound.

"Don't fall asleep," I said sharply.

I reached over and slapped her cheek. It was as cold as my own palm.

"But I'm sleepy," she whispered.

"I'll try to warm you as best as I can," I promised.

I looked around for something to burn.

I wanted to tear the wooden floors up and set them on fire, but that was impossible.

Our options, and the chances of us surviving, were decreasing by the minute.

"Damn it!" I muttered, my mind growing cloudy.

Fatigue was creeping in, the same way it had overtaken Yuki.

"Don't sleep!" I shook her gently. It took a moment before she fluttered her eyes open.

"But I'm so sleepy," she murmured, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Talk. Say something, anything to keep yourself awake," I urged.

I needed warmth, and fast. Even just for a little while.

"What are you looking for?" Yuki asked.

When she spoke, it was reassuring because it meant she was still alive.

"Paper." I replied.

"What for?"

"To burn."

Even our short, clipped conversation was better than silence.

"Paper? Of course!" Yuki exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with sudden realization.

"Yuki?" I prompted.

"There's paper." She reached out, pulling something forward. "Sanae gave me this."

She held up a shopping bag from the bookstore.

I had completely forgotten about it.

It felt like a lifetime ago that Kouhei had teased us about it.

"She might not be happy with us, but let's burn it," I said firmly.

"Pass it to me," I added.

I tore off the cellophane tape and pulled out the books inside.

"Masaki?" Yuki's voice was tinged with confusion.

"This..." My fingers trembled.

"This?" she echoed.

"Th-th-thi-this!! This!!" My voice cracked in disbelief.

"What's the matter?" Yuki asked, blinking at me.

"This!!" I didn't know where I found the strength, but I managed to fling the magazine onto the ground in exasperation.

Whose idea was this? Mashiro? It had to be Mashiro.

"What's the matter? It's paper," Yuki said, her brow furrowed.

"I know it's paper," I snapped.

"What kind of book was it? ...Oh," she muttered as realization dawned.

The magazine lay open on the ground.

"It's a different kind of fuel... hey!" I yelled as Yuki picked it up and began flipping through the pages.

"Um, Yuki, you shouldn't-"

"Th-th-thi-this!! This!?" She slapped the magazine with her palm, her disbelief evident.

I stayed silent, bracing myself for the inevitable outburst.

"Whatever this is, it's dirty!" she spat, glaring at me. "Do you mean to say men enjoy looking at things like this? Despicable!"

"If you say that, you're condemning all men as perverts!" I blurted out defensively. "It's natural! It comes from our instinct to want to reproduce!"

"What did you say?" Yuki's tone shifted dangerously.

"Huh?" I blinked, suddenly realizing the weight of my words.

"Um..." Oh no. This was bad.

"This is it?" Yuki stepped closer, too close. I could smell her scent.

"Yeah," I admitted, completely disarmed.

"I see," she said, nodding to herself.

Before I could react, she began peeling off the cling film around her kimono.

"Yuki!? What are you doing!?" My voice cracked.

"This." She waved the magazine under my nose.

"We're about to freeze to death! This isn't the time!" I protested.

"If I do exactly what these women are doing in this book, I get a baby, don't I?" she asked, tilting her head.

"Will you please be more considerate about time and place?" I said weakly.

"There's a blizzard outside, so no one will disturb us," she pointed out. "This IS the right time and place."

"Um, I-I-I'm the type that needs the feels to do this!" I stammered.

"The feels? What are you talking about? We're doing this now, whether you like it or not."

I couldn't help but think of how horrifying this situation would be if our roles were reversed.

"Can we please try this in a better situation? Please!?" I begged.

"It WILL become a better situation. I think." She replied.

"You don't sound too sure of yourself!"

"Come on, stop complaining and get on with it." She said as she placed my hand on the knot of her Obi belt.

"If you pull on this, everything will come loose."

Despite my protesting, I couldn't pull my hand back.

"It's so cold Masaki," She said as she pushed me down to the floor.

I lay back, watching her long hair cascade around me like a curtain. In that moment, she was the only thing I could see.

"Warm me up," she whispered.

I felt caged.

Trapped.

I couldn't run away from her.

Tied.

I couldn't get away from her.

If I just gave a tug, I could have her naked in my arms.

It felt unreal, and I was about to yield.

Just me, and Yuki.

"I..." I hesitated.

And then, something shifted inside me. I began to understand why I'd stayed with her all along.

"Masaki," Yuki said again, reaching for me. "Warm me up."

She reached out, and I tightened my hold on her. Her forehead dropped to my chest, and then...

Silence.

"Yuki?" I said, panic stabbing through me.

I sat her up and cradled her in my arms.

She wouldn't move. She couldn't move.

"Why...?" she whispered weakly. "I can't move."

She no longer had the strength to support herself.

"You're right here, by my side," she said faintly, "and I can't move."

"Yeah, Yuki. I'm right here," I said gently.

I kept talking to her-babbling, really-anything to keep her conscious. If she fell asleep now, I was sure she'd never wake up again.

"I'll get us out of here," I promised.

"Masaki..." she murmured, her half-lidded eyes meeting mine.

She must've understood what I was about to do.

"No!" she pleaded, trying to summon more strength than she had.

But I turned around.

The wolfskin on the altar shimmered faintly.

"Shiro-sama," I called. "Please come out. I need your help."

The Golden Bough

"You called?" came a voice.

The wolfskin glowed. Light rippled from it, forming into the shape of a small girl.

"And here I was, determined to keep my promise to Kouhei," she said with a sigh. "He gave me five big tubs of ice cream just to leave you alone."

She looked down at us, still shivering on the floor, smirking.

It was easy for her to jump from Yashiro to Yashiro. It was no doubt easy for her to travel here instantly, this was her shrine after all.

"And once again, I find two humans using my house as a lovers' rendezvous," she said. "Show some respect."

"I didn't intend for anything to happen," I replied.

"All men say that," she said flatly.

I didn't want to argue.

"What happened to the others?" I asked.

"They made it down safely. They're rallying everyone to climb back up. They'll reach you by dawn."

"By dawn...?" I echoed.

"Yup."

She left it at that, letting the implication sink in.

"Yuki won't make it till dawn," I said grimly.

"Yup," she echoed again, almost amused.

Yuki stirred beside me, forcing herself up. She withdrew her naginata, using it for support as she stood.

"Why did you come?" she asked coldly.

"Because I was called," Shiro replied simply.

"Then leave."

"You're pointing a blade at a god in her own home?" Shiro raised an eyebrow. "How rude."

It was obvious Yuki didn't appreciate Shiro's humor. I could almost hear her grinding her teeth.

"Shiromaru."

There was a flash of movement, too fast for our eyes.

A blur whipped across Yuki, then returned to Shiro's side

"My..." Yuki looked down at her bare hands.

"*My apologies, Miss.*" Shiromaru spoke, his head turned towards us.

He had Yuki's naginata between his teeth.

"*God's orders.*" He broke the weapon in half with a bite.

"No...!" Yuki sank to the ground, as if that had taken the last of her soul.

"We have no time," I said urgently.

"That's right," Shiro agreed.

"Please help us."

"Sure," she replied. "But not for free. You'll need to do something for me."

"What is it?" I asked warily.

"Cut your ties," she said smoothly.

I knew what she meant.

"Remove her from your life," she continued. "Be mine entirely, and you both live. That's the deal."

"Masaki..." Yuki's voice cracked, barely more than a breath.

I gave my answer. "Alright."

"Masaki!" she cried, stricken.

"I knew you'd agree," Shiro said with a grin.

"But I'll die someday too, you realize that?"

"I can be content with a few decades," she replied. "Just indulge me while you last."

She stood before me, her expression unreadable.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"To be loved."

The goddess before me had repeatedly took solace from something that would never last.

It was how she preserved herself from wearing away through eternity.

It was the reason she kept in contact with people.

She connected to them, loved them, stayed with them until they departed, and then did it all over again.

I was probably just one out of the many in her time.

But even so...

"Alright."

I took her hand.



"You'll choose me, then?"

Her hand was small. Cold.

"If I don't, we'll both die."

"Is that the only reason?"

"If you don't like it... you could always change me," I said. "Shape me however you want."

"I do have all the time in the world," she mused, laughing softly. "I could even make you a god, letting you live forever the way I do."

"If you want," I said.

"Really?" She blinked. That surprised her. "Every man I've ever been with refused."

"Then I'd be the first."

"Aren't you afraid of immortality?"

"It's unreal to me," I said. But I like the unreal.

"You'll have to prove you'll keep your promise," she said, looking away.

"Shiro-sama?"

"Shiro."

"What?"

"Call me Shiro."

"...Shiro."

She shuddered. "Ugh. I'll get used to that."

"I need to get used to it too," I said.

She approached. "You don't need to do anything. Just leave everything to me."

I held my breath.

"If you prefer kimonos, I wouldn't mind wearing one."

So she remembered my particular tastes.

She pressed against me. Her warmth radiated through.

"Masaki, love me."

"You'll have to save Yuki first," I reminded her.

"Be more romantic, won't you?!"

"A promise is a promise. And-"

"No."

She cut me off sharply.

"You'll take me in front of this girl. She'll watch. She must know you're mine."

Yuki gasped.

"That's the law of the Golden Bough," Shiro declared. "He who conquers must be killed before his power wanes. The killer takes his power, and proves it to all."

Just moments ago, Yuki had ruled over me. Now Shiro wanted to stake her claim.

"That's how gods are," she said. "We kill, we take, and we provide. You want a harvest? You reap what you sow."

She met my gaze, calm and absolute.

"And you think I'll agree to that?" I asked, no longer hiding my irritation.

"It's for your own good, Masaki. Don't pretend. That girl tempted you, but it was only weakness."

I said nothing.

I didn't confirm or deny her words. Her strength, her power, was absolute.

And I just bowed to it.

"Anyway," she said, her golden eyes flashing.

Warmth bloomed in the room.

"Once you're warm enough," she said to Yuki, smirking, "you'll be able to get down safely."

She had created a shelter, an oasis from the blizzard.

Then she turned back to me.

"And I need you warm too, Masaki. For... other reasons." She grinned. "You probably can't work that thing with goosebumps all over."

I groaned. "Do you have to be so graphic?"

"You'd better get used to it." Shiro said "I'll be asking for you whenever I want to from now, and you'll be asking for me too."

"I will do no such thing. Probably. Maybe. Perhaps."

"Now I must take you and destroy every bit of hope the girl has on having you for herself." Shiro's eyes glittered, and she looked down at Yuki in triumph.

She reached out for me.

I reached back. My hand went to her check and pulled her forward.

I could see every bit of color drain from Yuki's already pale face.

What am I doing now?

I didn't have an answer to that.

I didn't know what I was doing at all.

I didn't feel as if I was living in my world.

I felt detached.

Reality was fading away.

It's alright.

It's alright?

Shiro let out a breath.

She closed her eyes.

And I-

"-Masaki!"

Neither Shiro nor I could ignore that voice.

We looked back.

Yuki Towada was on her feet.

The God and the Girl

"Child, it must be hard for you just to stand," Shiro said with a mocking smile. "Why don't you relax and lie down?"

"If I do that," Yuki replied, her voice strained, "you'll make me watch something that will kill my soul."

"Yes," Shiro admitted without shame, "but you will live."

"I don't need a life from your mercy."

Yuki's voice trembled. It was a miracle she could speak at all,

She stood only by the sheer force of her will.

"Masaki," she whispered.

"This is the only way to keep us alive," I said softly.

"You'll bow down to that god," Yuki asked, her breath ragged, "just to stay alive?"

"There's nothing left if we die."

"You're leaving me?"

"I never chose you in the first place."

She flinched. "You haven't chosen Shiro either."

"Now I have," I said. "If I don't, we'll both die."

"And because of that, you'll suffer the pain of immortality?" she said bitterly

"Make your choice," Shiro cut in, her voice smooth and indifferent. "It doesn't matter to me either way. I have time. If you fail me here, I'll find another opportunity."

"You know he doesn't love you, Shiro," Yuki said.

"The same goes for you," Shiro replied coldly.

"But I can change that."

Shiro chuckled. "You can change that? How? I have all the time in the world to reshape everything. But what do you have? A life that's already running out. What else can you offer him?"

Yuki lowered her gaze. "I have nothing."

"Exactly. That's why-"

"But I don't need anything!" Yuki snapped.

Shiro stiffened.

"Are you going to choose Shiro, Masaki?" Yuki asked.

"I think it's the only choice I have." I muttered.

"You're being realistic." she said

"I..." My voice caught. I felt like I'd just been slapped.

"You're about to make a choice that is against your principles."

"You're telling me I'm making a realistic choice when I'm going to turn into a god?"

"What is power? What is time? You know it means nothing. You do not value it, that is why you chose both me and Shiro."

"I'm attracted to Shiro because she is a god."

"But you don't care for her powers. You are only fascinated by what she is, and what she appears to be."

She was right.

I've always said I am attracted to all things unreal.

Then again, what is real? Had I ever thought of that before?

I hadn't.

"As long as something looks worthy of your attention, you will bow down to it. Masaki, you're hopeless; you're weak. You always have been, and probably always will be. That's how you're made, Masaki Konno."

I couldn't deny any of it. There was no reason to.

She was right. I was weak.

I've always knelt before power.

I would try to avoid being manipulated, but...

A part of me wished for it.

"That's why..."

I couldn't imagine what she was going to do.



"... I must be a woman that rules you entirely, even more than any goddess ever could!"

She kissed me.

No, it wasn't just a kiss.

She had one hand on my chin, and the other clutched on the back of my head. She had taken hold of me, I was her captive.

My mind went blank.

"You...you...!!" Shiro's voice was so far away now.

What she said didn't matter anymore.

Yuki's kiss was suffocating.

She didn't let go; she wouldn't allow me to let go.

I couldn't catch my breath.

But I didn't mind even if I died this way.

She wasn't a goddess; she wasn't immortal.

She was somebody who's name would probably be forgotten in history.

But she was, at that moment, beyond anything I could imagine.

Her eyes.

She wasn't looking at me.

She was staring at Shiro, as if to challenge her.

They burned with a cold fire, and glittered with life.

With one look, she had overpowered a goddess.

I felt her determination, her will.

We will fight this.

The odds may be against us, but we will fight this.

She was strong.

She was only human.

She didn't have the experience, nor time that Shiro had, but yet, she was capable of changing everything in a split second.

At that moment I believed if she wanted to, she could do anything, even conquer the world.

But now, her only interest was in me.

It was unnatural.

It was a mistake.

I knew that, but...

"Masaki."

I didn't even remember when she released me.

In the darkness, I could make out the shape of her tongue.

Her breath was hot.

She stepped away, and my knees gave way.

"I...what have you done to me?" I asked hoarsely.

She gave me a triumphant smile.

She kept silent.

But I knew what she wanted.

It may not have been the best option, but...

"We might die, you know," I said.

"Even so." She replied.

So I gathered myself together, and stood up.

"I'm borrowing this." I said as I picked up the broken naginata by Shiro's feet.

I looked at Yuki for a moment to make sure she had no regrets.

There was no need to. She had made up her mind.

I nodded, and knelt before her, pointing the blade towards her kimono.

With one slice, I cut through the material, making a slit between her legs.

I tossed the blade aside, and turned to offer her my back.

She climbed on.

I caught hold of her legs, making sure she was in a steady position.

With the kimono out of the way, I could piggy back her now.

"Stop!" Shiro yelled as she realized what we were about to do. "Are you mad!?"

"Yeah, probably."

If madness was to descend a mountain through a blizzard carrying a girl on my back, which it definitely is.

"Why!?" she cried. "Why would you make such a stupid decision!?"

"I don't know." I said. "I know it's not the best way."

"You aren't just putting your life at risk, the girl will die as well. If both of you die, Kouhei, your friends, your family, they will mourn you. Don't you understand the pain you will inflict on them!?"

"I know. If I was clever, I'd probably buy time until Yuki recovered from the cold, but I don't think that would have been honest."

"I wouldn't have wanted that either." Yuki whispered in my ear.

"We'll be going now."

"I won't save you."

"Excuse me?" I asked, turning slightly.

"I don't care if you live or die anymore. Go on, go ahead, leave and freeze to death."

"I know." I murmured, and began walking.

"I'm serious! I won't save you, even if you begged and prayed!"

The large tears streaming down her face dropped to the wooden floor like the beginning of rain.

"Shiro," I stopped at the door, and looked back.

She stopped crying for a moment.

"I'll see you again."

I opened the door and walked out from the comfort of Shiro's warm shrine into the deathly cold.

Whatever moved me to do something as stupid as this?

Probably the same thing that inspired mankind to do the most epic things in history.

"It's called love." Yuki whispered.

Descent

I knew this would happen.

Even though I had my gloves on, my fingertips were frozen, and I couldn't feel anything.

Whenever the wind blew up the mountainside, I almost tumbled over, even with Yuki's weight added to my back.

Shiro was right. This was madness.

"Masaki," Yuki said softly, "what do you want to do when you get home?"

"Take a shower." I muttered "A really hot one."

"You prefer showers to baths? Unbelievable."

"It's fast and easy."

"You could come over to my place. I'll wash your back for you."

"No thank you."

"You think I will take advantage of you in the bath?"

"Yes."

"Well you're right."

I let out a faint huff. "Baths are supposed to be relaxing. I don't want to lose HP in a place where I'm supposed to gain them."

"HP? What's that? Horny Points?"

Why do you keep trying to turn it to that direction?"

We were making pointless conversation, just to take our minds off the cold.

Now and then, Yuki would let me know which direction to go.

I had no idea how long I walked.

It felt like hours. But there's a saying: time passes slowly when you're in pain.

My guess? We hadn't made much progress at all.

I kept moving.

If I stopped to rest, even for a second, I felt like I would never be able to get up again.

It was so cold, I wouldn't have even been surprised if the white breath coming from my mouth froze before it could dissipate.

"How are you holding up Yuki?"

"I'm fine, because you're warm."

We've had this conversation so many times.

Each time, her voice got weaker.

"Yuki?" My arms had lost all sensation for a while now. I didn't even know if I was holding her.

"We probably won't make it."

I lifted my right foot to take one more step.

The snow was falling so thickly, I couldn't see anything more than a few meters in front of me.

The batteries in the penlight I held in my mouth had died ages ago.

It was a miracle we could still feel one another at all.

Our bodies were frozen to the core.

"Do you regret it?" I asked.

"Regret what?" she asked back.

"If we has stayed with Shiro, we would be warm right now."

"You idiot." she muttered.

"I know I'm an idiot."

"I've never felt happier in my life."

"Then, you wouldn't mind if you died now?"

"You're an idiot, and you're insensitive too." she said.

I could feel my legs beginning to give out.

"I'm not going to be satisfied until I have more of you. Until I know everything about you." she whispered.

"Is that so?"

"First, we'll have a baby. I haven't given up on that either, despite the way you resisted me at the shrine."

"I wonder what Kouhei will say?" I grumbled. "Probably never let me live it down."

Just imagining all the slander I would get about my manhood made me feel depressed.

"You deserve it, coward."

I couldn't deny it.

"Ha ha...kidding..."

Surprisingly, she didn't press the subject, and fell silent instead.

I was worried she might have fallen asleep. I gave her a little shake, but she was awake.

My limbs were numb. All I could feel was her breath on my neck and her weight against my back.

"The wind has stopped," Yuki murmured.

I looked around.

She was right. Everything was so still and quiet, it was almost like we had stepped into a picture book.

I began walking downhill in bigger strides.

I didn't have the strength to put caution in my steps, I simply moved my legs automatically.

The sky was beginning to pale.

Walking through the mountain forest in silence, a strange serenity came over me.

Everything seemed so otherworldly.

"It's a new day today. It's the New Year." Yuki said.

"Yeah."

"Happy New Year."

"Yeah."

"What kind of answer is that?"

"Yeah."

"Masaki?"

"Dawn's coming." I mumbled.

I could see a hint of yellow creeping into the sky through the branches above us.

My knees gave way.

"This is it."

I fell forwards, face down into the snow.

"Masaki," she whispered, her voice warm in my ear.

I didn't care about the pain or the impact, nor did I feel it.

I was so exhausted, yet I felt at peace.

"Are we going to die?"

"Yeah."

"Can you tell me something?"

"Yeah."

"Do you love me?"

"No."

She was silent.

"That's not what I meant," I told her gently, before she jumped to conclusions. "I meant, no I won't answer your question. If I did, I would feel as if I said it because of the circumstances, not because I really meant it."

"But if you don't tell me now, I'll never know. We don't have much time left."

"That's a shame..."

"Masaki? Masaki..."

I could hear a faint voice calling my name.

It got smaller and smaller until it faded away, and I couldn't hear it anymore.

I was so sleepy. Gradually, I lost my consciousness.

I took my last breath.

Then I let it go.

The party's over

"Achoo,"

I woke up.

I was lying down in a vehicle, judging from the hum and vibration around me.

"Don't move." The voice came from a woman garbed in white who peered down at me through her spectacles.

"What's your name?"

"Masaki Konno."

"Do you know where you are now?"

"...An ambulance?"

"What is your most prized possession?"

"A Kimono gravure magazine."

"Okay, you're fine. Good. Patient stable, no signs of memory loss. Has a tendency to get excited over women garbed in kimono."

"Please don't put down that last bit!" I croaked.

"Achoo!"

I looked to the side.

"Achoo, Achoo!"

"She's weak, but alive." The woman reassured me.

Right next to me, Yuki lay on her gurney sneezing.

"She must be allergic to the fur she was wrapped in. We took it away, but she's still reacting to it."

Fur? I noticed something tickling my nose.

"This..." I pulled the sheet of fur that served as my blanket closer to my face to examine it.

"Yup, that's it." The woman said. "Where is it from? It's too white to be fox or raccoon, And if it were bear you wouldn't be here." She tilted her head inquiringly.

"It's wolf fur." I replied.

"What? You know our native wolves have been extinct for a long time. Don't tell me we've imported timber wolves to our mountains!"

I started laughing.

"Why are you laughing? Tell me, I want to know!"

She shook the gurney without any regard that I was, in fact, her patient.

Of course, I didn't tell.



"Are you sure that was the right thing to do?"

From afar, they could see the red lights of the ambulance rushing away.

"I thought you weren't going to help." Shiromaru asked the goddess who was straddled on his back.

"Just this time." She said.

"Well, aren't you a softie."

"See you again,"

"What?"

"He said, 'See you again'."

"He probably said that just to keep you interested, despite his choice up there."

"Do you think he's that manipulative?"

"I don't know. Sometimes he's too simple, sometimes he thinks too much. Can't read that one."

"Give me a straight answer."

"It's both." he said.

Shiro lifted her eyebrows.

"I think he said that so you would look out for him. But if you ask me if he only said that to be saved, I don't think so."

"Yeah. He wouldn't have said that without a purpose, would he?"

"How would I know?"

"Never mind then. Shiromaru," she tugged on his neck.

Shiromaru whirled around, ready to leave.

"You know what?" Shiromaru paused, as if to wonder whether he should say what he thought.

"Tell me." Shiro commanded.

"It's going to be difficult if you're planning on winning him back."

"I know that." She recalled the way Yuki stared her down when she kissed Masaki.

She could have stopped her using her power.

But she couldn't.

At that moment, Shiro had been overpowered by the girl's determination.

"But I can't let her take Masaki away."

"Going to fight for him?"

"Of course I will."

"That's strong coming from someone that cowered under a child's glare, and saved a boy when she said she wouldn't."

"Say what you want, I'll show that girl."

"Take your time. After all, that's all we've got."

"Alright Shiromaru, enough talk. Let's go have some fun."

"As in?"

"Going to steal...I mean, get some ice-cream!"

They returned to the mountains under the pale light of the morning sky.

Epilogue

New Years, mid-day, at Towada hospital.

It took a while to finish all of the medical tests I was required to take just to make sure I was okay.

I was put in a private ward on the top floor of Towada hospital, a section usually reserved for the most important guests.

Bored, I flipped through all of the TV channels, but it was the first day of the New Year and the programs generally looked the same.

I sighed.

Despite almost freezing to death, my vitals were completely healthy.

But just in case, they wanted to monitor me for the night.

If I was alright tomorrow I could get discharged, or so my doctor (the one that kept shaking the gurney) told me.

Although there wasn't much to do back at home anyway, I didn't want to stay in the hospital for the entire Sanganichi of New Year.

"Masaki?"

It was Kouhei's voice.

"Come in."

Silence.

Maybe he was feeling bad about leaving us at the shrine.

Just as I was about to get up to open the door, it flew open with a loud bang!

All three of my guests slid forward on the ground, face down on their bellies with their arms stretched out.

"Sorry Sir!!!" They all yelled in unison.

"W-what are you guys doing!?" I asked.

"It's called the Gotai-touchi." Sanae said.

"Onii-chan said this is the least we could do to beg for forgiveness." Mizuho explained.

"Can you tell how sorry we are?" Kouhei asked.

"I'm not angry, or rather I was so surprised by your ridiculous entrance I forgot to lose my temper."

"That means you're still angry with us. Comrades, his highness is not satisfied! On your mark!" Kouhei shouted.

"Aye Aye Captain!"

All three of them lifted their arms above their heads, ready to dive to the ground.

"Alright, alright! I forgive you! Just stop it, this is embarrassing! The door is open and everyone is watching!"

"Sorry Sir!"

"Sorry Sir!"

"Sorry Sir!"

Too late.

Eventually, they did calm down.

"Man, I am so relieved you're alive." Kouhei sighed.

"You could have just told me that instead of scraping your face on the floor, you know."

"Yeah, but it's not something to be taken lightly. If anything had happened, we would have regretted it our whole lives. Kouhei suggested it because we are really, really sorry." Sanae explained.

"I know."

I wasn't angry. Truly.

"But, why didn't you wait for us to come rescue you?" Mizuho asked
"We thought you would stay there and wait for us to come. It would have been a safer choice."

"A lot went on up there." I said.

If they only knew. At first we were horrified at being abandoned, then the blizzard hit and Yuki almost died, then Shiro came in with her proposal and I almost became a god, and after that, Yuki...

"Masaki-kun, your face." Sanae said.

I snapped out of it and noticed that Mizuho had taken out a compact mirror so I could see myself. I had turned beet red.

"You seem really happy about whatever you were thinking about. Did something good happen in the shrine, I wonder? Hmm?"

Mizuho was pretending to stroke a moustache, looking very pleased with herself.

"Nah, I was just thinking how cold it was, how it hurt so much, and how I almost died. I forgot, who put me in that predicament, hmm?"

"Sorry sorry sorry!! I didn't mean to joke about it, Ill do anything you say!"

I decided I could play this guilt card for a while, at least whenever Mizuho got cocky.

"How's Yuki?" I changed the subject.

"She's regained consciousness. She was being examined not too long ago." Kouhei replied.

"Can I go see her?"

"They told us that only family are allowed in at the moment, but I think they would make an exception for you."

"I'll go see her."

"We'll tag along. Maybe you can get us through." Kouhei said.

"We should give Masaki-san some time alone with her." Mizuho suggested.

"...Yeah, we'll stay here and wait then."

"I'll ask, and come back to let you know if you guys are allowed to visit her. By the way,"

Something occurred to me as I stuck my feet into the hospital slippers.

"What's the matter?" Sanae asked.

"Just now, you called Kouhei by his name instead of calling him Kouhei-kun. I just wondered about the familiarity. Is something going on between you two?"

"Oh!" Sanae burned bright red, as if I'd just switched on a lamp.

"Um, uh, I, oh!!" she stammered.

"H-have I said something wrong!?"

She was flailing her arms about now, and it was frankly dangerous to go near her.

"Kouhei, what did you do?"

"Don't ask me. I never even noticed she'd changed the way she called me. Hey, why are you looking at me like that Mizuho?"

"Men!" Mizuho said, looking utterly fed up.

"I think I'll just go see Yuki now."

"Good luck."

I left the room.

As I walked down the hallway, I found an unexpected figure sitting on the bench in front of Yuki's room.

"Mom?"

"Oh, Masaki-chan, you're awake! Mommy was so worried about you! But I still managed to eat and sleep just fine; no damage done there. Don't you fret about me."

It was so typical of mom, it was strangely reassuring. I had indeed survived and was alive.

"Are you comfortable here? Is the bed soft enough?" Mashiro Towada, who was sitting next to mom, smiled at me.

"Almost too soft." I answered "Maybe because I'm used to the harder mattresses at home."

"You're being modest."

"Um... about the hospital fees..."

"Don't worry about that! Mommy's gonna win a year's worth of hospital fees for you. Just you wait!"

I noticed there was a stack of playing cards and money placed between them.

These grown ups were incorrigible.

"She's already accumulated a year's worth of debt, just so you know." Mashiro said with a smirk.

"I, I'll win twice the amount back!! No problem!"

With her transparent reactions, mom was the worst card player ever. She'd never won a single hand of poker in her life.

"...I'm not sure how long it will take, but I will pay you back each time I receive my salary from my part time job." I said.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"But..."

"You saved my daughter's life, of course I will cover your expenses. Besides, children do not need to worry about these things." she said gently.

"Well, that's my mom there. She's family."

"As you are to Towada. You will be cared for." she said firmly.

"That's kind of intimidating." I murmured.

"Hey, hey! If you consider the fact I'm related to Masaki-chan, that means..."

"You're an adult. Take care of your own responsibilities."

"Satan!!" my mom protested.

"Can I see Yuki?"

"She's been waiting for you all morning." Towada said with a smile

I took my leave and walked towards the door.

Just as I was about to turn the door handle...

"Masaki-chan!"

I looked back.

"When we get home, I'm gonna cook you your favorite dish!"

I smiled "Thanks mom."

There was an offering of rice wine and Osechi placed on a small altar built into a corner near the ceiling of the room.

"So much for New Year." Yuki Towada smiled to herself. "Let everyone know I'm sorry I'll be absent for Hatsumode."

"We'll just go after you're discharged."

"You seem in good health."

"I suppose you're surprised I'm not as weak as you thought for a city boy?"

I smiled, and she smiled with me.

"We're alive."

"Yeah."

"I didn't think Shiro-sama would save us."

"Neither did I."

"That's a lie."

"Yeah, it is."

Lately, it'd been difficult to keep secrets from Yuki.

"You said, 'See you again'. I couldn't forget that."

"I thought if I didn't take you away from there, you'd fight to the death."

"You're right, and I will end this with Shiro-sama once and for all, someday."

"Stop that, you're getting all bloodthirsty again. Can't we just all live in peace?"

"You could just choose me. It's all because you..."

Oh no. Alarms went off in my head.

"That's why I said 'See you again'. I thought if we were going to descend the mountain, I needed some sort of insurance we would come out alive."

I quickly said something before she could start nagging.

"So you used Shiro-sama's feelings for you?"

"If she really meant to abandon us, she wouldn't have said she would so many times."

"That's just cruel. You took advantage of her, do you know that? Wait..."

I kept quiet.

"Let me ask you. If Shiro-sama proved herself she had something more than I did, what would you have done?"

"Taken Shiro-sama's offer."

"You haven't changed one bit. So now, you've chosen me for the moment."

"Yes."

"I think I might strangle you in fury if I kept this conversation going, so I'm just going to let it go for now."

And that was that.

I resisted the urge to turn around, because I could feel several prying eyes on my back. I could hear some whispering too.

"Hey, don't push me!!"

"Shhh!! Shut up Onii-chan! They'll notice us!"

"Aww, it doesn't look like anything is going on." Sanae muttered.

"Mami-chan, are you sure your son's not gay?"

"No, he isn't! I checked!"

"Gruff. (*Just get on with it.*)"

"Oh my god! It's a real wolf!! Let me touch!!"

I got a headache.

But...

"Maybe I should get on with it."

"Masaki?"

There wasn't a time better than this.

"Do you remember when I said 'No, I won't answer your question'?"

"What?...Oh, that time. I thought I would die with regrets when you said that."

"I'm always being forced to do what other people tell me to do. Sometimes I like to make my own decisions."

"But, you like being told what to do."

"I know, but even so..."

I looked down.

"Oh look!! There's a monster under your bed!!"

"What!! where??" She lunged forward to see what I was pointing at.

And I kissed her.

Because sometimes, I like being in control too.

"Whaaaaaaa!?" The door burst open. Everyone fell on top of one another.

"W-what are you all doing here!?" Yuki asked, oblivious to their spying.

"Oh wow, mommy's so proud! That was stinking sweet!"

"I didn't think you'd do that!" Kouhei exclaimed.

"I feel like I've just witnessed a miracle." Mizuho said.

"Way to go, Yuki!" Sanae cheered.

"I assume you've made up your mind to marry into Towada, young man."

They could say whatever they wanted. I couldn't care less.

I took Yuki's hand.

"Masaki, I'm going to ask you again. If Shiro-sama proves she's better than I am in someway, what would you do?"

"Maybe I'll choose her instead."

"So you mean, I must always be someone that exceeds your every imagination."

Every time, but it shouldn't be too hard for you.

"I see, you've already won my heart, but I'll have to keep fighting for yours."

"I guess."

She wasn't angry this time though, and she was smiling. I placed a palm on her cheek.

"Masaki, um there are people watching..."

"I can't stand this!" Mizuho groaned "This is too embarrassing to watch!"

But I didn't care what anybody else thought.

Yuki closed her eyes.

I moved closer, and-

"Stop right there!!" Shiro's voice rang out as a light flashed from the altar.

"Gruff! (*I knew she couldn't keep away!*)"

"Catch me!" Shiro jumped down from the altar.

"Whoa!" I caught hold of her just in time.

She was grinning, once again the fearless goddess I knew.

"Just you wait Masaki, I'll win you back in no time!" She smugly smirked at Yuki "Watch your back! I'm not going to give up so easily!"

"Masaki! You said you've chosen me! Let go of her now and toss her out of the window!"

I tend to be attracted to all things unreal.

Because reality can be merciless.

There's Yuki, there's Shiro, and there's my friends.

I'm laughing.

I can't tell whether this is good, or bad.

Whether this is progress, or regression.

But there is one thing I am sure of.

As I'm being pulled in a tug of war between these two girls;

I'm right in the middle of the balance, and I feel like I belong.



This is me, now.

Skit

I was going to get discharged.

Making sure I hadn't left anything in the room, I looked around the place swiftly. It was easy though, because the only personal belongings I had was a book that Kouhei got for me. It was titled "Knowing Love". I could tell he was trying to be funny.

"Are you leaving now?"

I turned around to see the doctor, who was giving me a lazy wave of her hand.

"Yeah, thanks for all you've done."

"Come back soon."

"I thought doctors are meant to say: 'I never want to see you again?'"

"This isn't a prison. Besides, you don't need to be half-dead just to say hi."

"Alright, I'll visit when I can."

"Good." She nodded, and started to walk away.

"Hey, are you sure you want to leave like that?" I called after her.

"Why? What's the problem?"

"No one's going to know your name if you exit that way. They'll all refer to you as 'that doctor'."

"Well, just make sure I'm described as 'that witty, beautiful doctor with nice legs' and I'm all good."

And with that, the witty, beautiful doctor with nice legs (whether or not that's true is left to your imagination) walked out without looking back.

As I left, I noticed that, even though it was the New Year, Towada hospital was packed with people. Maybe because of it's 24hr ER.

I sat down on a chair in the reception area, waiting for my turn.

Judging from the line, I would be here for a while. I wasn't in a hurry though. The only thing I had to do today was give Kouhei back his book.

"Masaki-san!"

"What brings you here?"

"To visit Yuki of course!"

It was Mizuho. She was visiting alone.

She ran towards me with her shoes loudly clapping on the ground.

"Touyama." I said as she came up to me.

"Yeah?"

"You do realize where we are?"

"Huh?" She looked around and noticed the attention she had drawn.

"Oh, excuse me." She meekly apologized.

We removed ourselves from the reception area to a spot where we could avoid the other patients' stink eye.

"Where's Kouhei and Sanae?"

"Sanae had to help at the shop. Onii-chan said he had preparations to do."

"Preparations?"

"He mentioned something along the lines of celebrating a comrade's return the way men do."

And then she continued with a filthy look: "I'm almost certain it has something to do with pornography."

She looked at me as if I was Kouhei's partner in crime.

"Hey, be kind." I urged. "Say what you want about me, but you're related to him by blood. You should give him more credit."

"BECAUSE I'm related in blood, I know when he can be the worst sort."

"That's not-"

I remembered a call I had with my mom earlier: "Masaki-chan! Mommy's gonna do a 24hr marathon of all her favorite Thursday TV dramas today, so I'm not gonna pick you up from the hospital! Get yourself home kid! Woo-hoo!!"

"-too far from the truth."

"Well, you're coming to visit Onii-chan anyway, so I'll just stick around and wait with you."

"Alright."

We chatted until it was my turn, so the wait didn't turn out too tedious.

I didn't miss the way the receptionist's eyes widened when she read my name.

It seemed like I'd garnered a reputation quickly as someone connected to the Towadas. I felt a headache coming on.

"I'm done."

"Let's stop by the convenience store on the way home. I'm pretty sure my useless brother only bought the tea."

We walked out of the hospital together.

"Masaki-kun."

I was stopped by a gentleman.

It was Ayumu Towada, Yuki's father.

"You saved Yuki's life. I'm indebted to you." he said solemnly. "Um... could I have a moment with you please?"

I glanced at Mizuho.

She nodded, and began to walk away.

"No, wait." Ayumu exclaimed. "This has something to do with you too."

"Huh?" Mizuho looked bemused.

"Can I talk with you?"

"Sure." I replied.

He was the total opposite of Yuki and Mashiro. It was hard to deny him.

"I'll try to be straightforward." After saying that, he paused.

There was a long stretch of silence.

"Um... we don't have all day," Mizuho, being the impatient one, spoke up first.

"Yes, sorry. It's just... it's harder than I thought."

He looked troubled, his eyebrows wrinkling together. When he did that, it made him look like a little boy.

"I'll say it. Masaki-kun, when you were with Yuki in the temple, did you do... it?"

"...No."

I didn't ask what.

"Huh? Do what?"

But Mizuho did.

Well, that was awkward.

Ayumu and I looked at each other as if trying to get the other to explain.

"What? What is this about?"

"About making babies,"

I sighed, resigned.

"You mean... Oh!"

"Yeah, that."

"Eek, sorry, sorry for making things awkward, sorry for being a dunce, I must be the stupidest girl on the planet..."

"W-well, it's okay, it's all good, and nothing happened, right?"

"No." Was it weird that I thought myself lucky because nothing happened?

"Thank god." Ayumu sighed, grabbing both my hands in his.

"Oh, thank god!!" He shook my hands up and down, almost as if he were praying.

I honestly didn't know what to say, but it was obvious he was really relieved.

I figured a normal parent would react this way, Yuki and Mashiro were the weird ones.

But then...

"Thank god we don't have another victim!"

"What?" My mind went blank at his words.

"What did you mean by that?" Mizuho asked, just as confused as I was.

"Me and Mashiro are thirty four years old," he began.

"I've heard that before." I said, recalling Mashiro's earlier meltdown at the dojo.

"And Yuki's seventeen, the same age as you are." Ayumu continued.

"Yes."

"Do the math."

Thirty four minus seventeen.

Wait a minute...

"Yuki was born when we were both seventeen." he admitted.

"Whaaaat!?" Both me and Mizuho were taken by surprise.

"I see." I finally understood.

The gentleman before me was worried that what happened 17 years ago would repeat itself.

"Yumi-san knew that. That's why she said that everything would turn out the way it will..." Mizuho muttered something under her breath, but I couldn't hear her.

"That's not all..." Ayumu laughed awkwardly.

"This might be relevant to you, but all of Towada's men marry into the family."

"I really don't want to consider that now." I said.

"Do you have the confidence to get away?" he asked.

"No, I don't." I admitted.

The situation was hopeless.

"You managed to break free this time. But me, and Yuki's grandfather, and great grandfather, and before that... we all had children at a very young age."

"You mean..."

Ayumu turned away to look at Ookami mountain. "What you experienced has been going on in that shrine for hundreds of years."

He patted me on the shoulder with a look of sympathy.

"Everyone, except you, fell prey to the Towada women."

We all fell silent.

And then...

"Father!" Yuki came running past the glass sliding doors. "You forgot your wallet. What would mother say if she knew?"

"Uh..." Ayumu mumbled.

"Um..." I echoed.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Mizuho, what's going on?"

I'm sure we all had funny expressions on our faces.

Mizuho and I were dumbfounded by what we had just heard.

And I'm sure we both had reached the same conclusion.

Which was-

"C-can someone explain?" Yuki asked. "You're looking at me like I've done something wrong."

-Never underestimate a Towada woman.

Appendix

Shiromaru: Shiro's faithful wolf companion. Originally named "Shirou" in the visual novel, I changed it for clarity.

Noren: Traditional Japanese fabric curtains hung in doorways or windows

Yashiro: A Shinto shrine. Sizes vary from large buildings to small structures that only hold a statue.

Naginata: A Japanese polearm with a curved blade, used by samurai, warrior monks, and notably onna-musha (female warriors).

Kubikirimaru: The name Yuki gave to her naginata. Roughly translates to "decapitate"

Kodachi: A short tachi sword, typically under 60 cm

Bokuto: A wooden sword used for training in martial arts like kendo and aikido. Often shaped like a katana

Sanganichi: The first three days of the Japanese New Year

Osechi: A traditional Japanese New Year meal, served in tiered lacquer boxes.